

Where Currents Meet

FRONTIERS IN POST-SOVIET
FICTION OF KHARKIV,
UKRAINE

TANYA ZAHARCHENKO

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WHERE CURRENTS MEET

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*Frontiers in Post-Soviet Fiction
of Kharkiv, Ukraine*

TANYA ZAHARCHENKO



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To Tatiana and Patrick

Literature is like memory: the farther you move away [from Kharkiv], the more distorted it becomes. One day someone should really try to collect these texts, assemble them into some sort of order, and construct one comprehensive text out of them—a unified set of symbols, whose random combination generated this new literature. These authors wouldn't gather as a group anywhere else, because literature has long ceased to be held together by performances, journals, or almanacs. The only thing that can connect writers today is, say, architecture, façades of old buildings, words written on walls, . . . broken glass under their feet and old names of city streets . . . all this *litter*. Literature emerges when you internalize it all.

—Serhiy Zhadan (2012)

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NOTES ON FORMAT

Transliteration

Transliteration in this book is according to the Library of Congress Romanization system. Exceptions have been made for names commonly known in other forms: Yuri (not Iuriï) Tsaplin.

Translation

Unless otherwise noted, translations from all Ukrainian-language and Russian-language sources are by me.

Referencing

Full details of every source are given at first citation, and abbreviated thereafter.

FOREWORD

When literature is considered in the light of memory, it appears as the mnemonic art par excellence.

—*Renate Lachmann (2004)*

As happens at times, this book grew out of my PhD dissertation, “Where the Currents Meet: Frontiers of Memory in the Post-Soviet Fiction of East Ukraine,” which was completed at the University of Cambridge in 2014. The last day of February was my chosen deadline for unloading its softbound copies at the Board of Graduate Studies in a partly triumphant and partly anticlimactic local ritual known as submission. The week before, Ukraine’s Maidan uprising claimed its largest number of victims yet. The bloodshed continued for several days. February 2014 saw the Maidan movement’s most fatal time.

Shortly afterwards, Twitter released a stunning visualization of all tweeted mentions of Ukraine from February 1 to February 25.¹ It consists of pulsating red graphics that overlay a world map. They start off as small, fairly unassuming dots, but toward the end of the month, they seem to cover the globe. Ttis explosion may well be one of

¹ Twitter Data, Twitter post, February 26, 2014, 9:13 a.m., <http://twitter.com/twitterdata>.

the shortest and most symbolic summaries of international awareness about Ukraine's protests and war.

Despite that winter's heavy atmosphere, I submitted as planned. Less than twenty-four hours later, one of the writers discussed on these pages, Serhiy (Serhiï) Zhadan, was hospitalized following a beating he took in our mutual hometown of Kharkiv in east Ukraine, during clashes over the city's administration building. New text begged to be added to the dissertation when it was merely a day old, before it even had a chance to reach the examiners. How does one cope when one's academic undertakings suddenly turn, essentially, into evolving war material? In today's world—partly through social media, alas. My status update on March 1, 2014, read as follows:

These months have been rough, trying to complete a dissertation while watching the worsening news from home, as well as reading media coverage of greatly varied quality and accuracy. My submission day nearly coincided with the beating of one of the authors I write about, Serhiï Zhadan. I do not quite know how to combine a sense of achievement with this growing ache. As if things are twisting into a vortex where people from all sides of the confrontation are torn, along with their broken hearts and burning memories, and you've got your 200-page "buoy of focus" to hold on to. I can only hope that, following its defense this spring, I shall change all references to conflict in Ukraine to the past tense in the final version.

One year later, in March 2015, as this manuscript was being updated and revised for publication, that wish had not yet come true. But the more I learn and write about my home region, the stronger the hope grows. Meanwhile, much has been written on Ukraine, as commentators continue to offer competing interpretations of the complex and grueling events in this diverse and dynamic Eastern European country. Today, its relationship with Russia is, as ever, decisive for the future of this part of the world. And, as ever, that relationship remains largely simplified as either inherently antagonistic or innately fraternal, depending on one's own position and aims.

In this book, I propose an analysis of the cultural experience in Ukraine's eastern borderlands—one that sees the region's many fron-

tiers as elements of a natural and complex continuum. I root this approach in literary analysis, focusing on the younger generation of writers in the vibrant city of Kharkiv. Structurally, much of the relevant theory is incorporated into the introduction. Chapter 1 attends to the contextual matters that must be addressed if the following analyses are to be historically and culturally located. Primary material, organized around the theme of frontiers, is presented in the subsequent chapters. Every effort has been made to incorporate updates in light of unfolding developments in Ukraine.

Today, after the Maidan uprising and in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is no such thing as a Russian southeast of Ukraine. Thoughtful observers realize that it never existed in the first place, at least in the monochrome form often imagined. As in the south, many residents of east Ukraine have nurtured a distinctive regional identity, which is now decisive for Ukraine's next steps as a country. The expression this identity finds at the intersection of literature and memory, and the shapes it assumes in the presence of frontiers, are the main focus of this study.



I am grateful to my colleagues at the Slavonic Studies department and the Ukrainian Studies programme at the University of Cambridge, particularly to Alexander Etkind and Rory Finnin for their astute advice. My home in Cambridge—King's College—has been unwaveringly supportive on all levels throughout my years there. I would like to acknowledge the Memory at War project, which brought me to the United Kingdom through the Humanities in the European Research Area Joint Research Programme (facilitated in the UK through the Arts and Humanities Research Council).

In Kharkiv, I am indebted to Andreï Krasniashchikh for sharing his knowledge of the city's literary scene, and to Serhiy Zhadan for friendship and inspiration. At different points in time, Julie Fedor, Sibelan Forrester, Luca Graverini, and Myroslav Shkandrij were insightful readers of several draft chapters, and Andreï Zorin has been a source of wit and wisdom about academia in general. Hard-working editors and reviewers at three journals—*Canadian Slavonic Papers* / *Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, and *Modern Language Review*—shared their

expertise when earlier versions of some chapters were published as articles. I am thankful to the reviewers of my manuscript at CEU Press, Marko Pavlyshyn and an anonymous contributor, whose thoughtful feedback was an honor to receive, as well as to my tireless editor, Szabolcs László.

My extended family, Elissa Parker and Robert Greenstein, provided a treasured positive presence while I worked on this project. A number of dear friends shared the inevitable ups and downs. My uncles in Ukraine, Oleg Maïboroda and Valera Yakovenko, as well as my brother Kirill Yakovenko, made every trip to Kharkiv warmer. Last but not least, I am grateful to my remarkable grandmother, Zinaida Maïboroda, a most keen guardian of silver linings.

This book is dedicated with love to my inspired and inspiring parents, Tatiana R. Zaharchenko and Patrick Breslin, who knew it was going to happen long before I did.

Introduction

DOUBLETAKE GENERATION AND THE SHIMMER OF FRONTIERS

If you gather the texts of the living [in this city] and juxtapose them, you can always notice the signs that emerge at the junctions, in those places where one writer grows silent and another tries to speak up.

—*Serhiy Zhadan (2012)*

Lot's wife may have faced a different fate today: these are exciting times for backward glances. As cultural, political, and social changes swept across the postsocialist regions of the world in recent decades, the study of how the past is remembered and forgotten acquired a particular relevance for those nations undergoing rapid transformation. In Ukraine, a new virtuoso generation of writers has been picking up the theme of their country's complex twentieth-century legacy and transforming it into captivating—and often surreal—narratives. The city of Kharkiv,¹ Ukraine's second-largest, is a major hub of this creative activity.

A significant portion of today's literary production in Kharkiv is carried out by writers who belong to what I call the doubletake generation, which was entering adulthood when the Soviet Union fell apart.

¹ During the Soviet times, the outer world knew this city mostly by its Russian spelling: Kharkov.

Those who faced 1991 in the formative age bracket between the brink of adolescence and its end would have experienced the collapsed state, and then continued their development in independent Ukraine. One of the foremost representatives of this generation, Serhiy Zhadan, verbalizes the intensity of this ordeal as follows: “In that bitter and sensitive time, when everything inside of you gets ripped apart and reattached, something similar was happening around us as well, and we had to watch.”² Doubletake, a delayed second reaction to a significant situation, refers to the negotiation by these authors of their peculiar historical experience.

The “doubleness” in doubletake comes from a combination of two temporally distinct reactions to the same series of life-changing events. The initial one happens “in that bitter and sensitive time” when the observer is a child or adolescent processing major external changes in addition to his or her individual internal ones, as Zhadan aptly observed. The second glance at those same turbulent social and political events takes place when the writer grows up. It is an act of recollection, a gesture towards the past that is made immediate through fiction as authors look back at their own lifetime. Such afterwordness is related to the “mode of belated understanding” consisting of a retroactive reevaluation of stressful events, which Sigmund Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action.³

A close look at the prose of Kharkiv’s doubletake generation reveals a distinctive preponderance of two patterns. One pattern is a consistent distorting of the flow of time, expressed through a quasi-autobiographical angle of narration and frequent overlaps between past and present. The other pattern is the blurring of space, expressed through a preoccupation with competing notions of inside and outside, which leads to the blurring of boundaries between other phenomena as well. Navigating these two tendencies—the blurring of borders in time and in space—requires an enhanced set of cognitive mapping techniques. The literary strategies behind such processes of navigation are the main focal points of the examination undertaken in this book, which investigates the spatiotemporal uncertainty in the selected group of texts, and interrogates how the protagonists deal with the resulting disorientation.

² Serhiy Zhadan, *Anarchy in the UKR* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2011), 111.

³ Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud’s Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 118.

The literature under study focuses on protagonists who are compelled to navigate past and present, inside and outside, when all related boundaries are presented and treated as fluid. Persistent uncertainty about where these boundaries lie results in a blurriness that irradiates everything else. A profound disorientation begins to affect the distinctions between such fundamental notions as life and death, guilt and innocence, sanity and madness. Writers who weave these preferences into their texts, as discussed in this book, include Anastasiia Afanas'eva, Anton Erkhov, Alexander Kamenetskiĭ, Oleh Kotsarev, Andreĭ Krasniashchikh, Oleg Petrov, Victor Shepelev, Yuri Tsaplin, Sashko Ushkalov, and Serhiy Zhadan.

Understanding boundary as the dividing line between two entities, and frontier as the larger zone near or beyond a boundary, I submit that blurred boundaries of time and space incorporate vacillating frontiers of other concepts (such as past and present), and that the resulting disorientation requires protagonists and readers to seek out strategies for navigating uncertainty. These strategies involve an enhanced form of cognitive mapping better described as cognitive plotting—one of the hallmarks of Kharkiv's doubletake fiction.

Time and space

The notion of cognitive mapping has roots in the academic turn to space and spatial theories as primary modalities—growing increasingly privileged over temporal ones—for understanding the world. Long before any of the writers under study in this book were born, Mikhail Bakhtin famously employed the term *chronotope* (timespace), which he described as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature,” and the inseparability of space and time.⁴ Thirty years later, in 1967, Michel Foucault maintained that “the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84. The original was written in 1937–38.

space, no doubt a great deal more than with time.”⁵ Another twenty years passed, and Fredric Jameson, one of the foremost theorists of postmodernism, observed “the waning of the great high-modernist thematics of time and temporality” in favor of spatial concepts.⁶ As the twenty-first century set in, Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift asserted that modern thought is permeated with space: “It is the flesh that flatters the bones of theory, . . . a representational strategy.”⁷ The anthology of spatial theories produced by these two authors is a helpful resource for understanding the theoretical context of spatialization in contemporary thought.

In line with these developments, Jameson formulated his prominent concept of cognitive mapping to describe a cultural aesthetic that relies on spatial issues as its central organizing method.⁸ This theory maintains that when the processes of globalization gave rise to a world in which one could no longer confidently situate oneself, art responded with new means of positioning a subject in space. Jameson’s approach to such positioning employs a lexicon that presumes stasis and structure. It incorporates a number of fixed, static concepts, such as coordinates and categories. He maintains, for instance, that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time.”⁹

This structure-oriented language highlights an overall aesthetics of organization. According to such aesthetics, transitioning away from modernism requires the skill of situating oneself in an increasingly complex world, which in turn creates a need for art that can be mobilized to organize this world. A useful and robust theory, classic cognitive mapping nevertheless has a limitation: it assumes that once art situates a subject in a steady system of coordinates, the subject is likely

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Places,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 23.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 64.

⁷ “Introduction,” in *Thinking Space (Critical Geographies)*, ed. Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

⁸ Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 89. The term “cognitive mapping” was introduced by psychologist Edward Tolman in the mid-twentieth century (Edward C. Tolman, “Cognitive Maps in Rats and Men,” *Psychological Review* 55 [1948]: 189–208).

⁹ Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 64.

to remain findable later. In other words, the presumed map is a fairly stable, constant one.¹⁰

Such a logic of categorization does not apply to the fiction under study, which recalls the post-traumatic canon of Giorgio Agamben's "zone of indistinction."¹¹ Cognitive mapping, as we know it, makes little allowance for the flowing notions of blurring and overlap, which are pervasive in the writings of Kharkiv's doubletake generation. The concept of stability, and the assumption that a situated subject, once positioned, can be found, are both off the table in this setting. We might as well be drawing maps on water. One could even argue that these writers problematize the idea of categories itself, since this idea formed a part of the modern, organized Soviet context to which they are responding.

If Jameson's language was the language of Newtonian physics, doubletake literature would be chaos theory.¹² To make existent cognitive mapping more applicable to the post-Soviet period, which comes with a particular set of complexities and traumas, two interdisciplinary fields can effectively supplement its framework: memory studies and border studies. The vocabulary of these two sets of theories takes on board, respectively, temporal and spatial fluidity, which this book focuses on.

Let us take a closer look at the two literary patterns identified above. One of them, the blurring of time, is connected to the authors' historically mandated position of pained watchfulness—the attention focused simultaneously inside and outside of oneself. This intense dual

¹⁰ In nautical terminology, a map is "a static document [that] cannot be used to plot a course. Rather it provides a predetermined course . . . to be followed." Moreover, "the type of vehicle is rarely a consideration" (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Office of Coast Survey, http://www.nautical-charts.noaa.gov/mcd/learn_diff_map_chart.html).

¹¹ "Testimony [about the camps] takes place where . . . the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject" (Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen [New York: Zone Books, 1999], 120).

¹² Edward Lorenz wrote in 2005 that chaos is "when the present determines the future, but the approximate present does not approximately determine the future" (Christopher M. Danforth, "Chaos in an Atmosphere Hanging on a Wall," *Mathematics of Planet Earth*, March 17, 2013, <http://mpe2013.org/2013/03/17>

emphasis may stand behind their leaning toward what Vitaly Chernetsky terms the “(quasi-)autobiographical mode.”¹³ Alexander Dmitriev describes this tendency as a “focus on autobiographism, exercise in the quasi-memoir genre (even among the very young writers!) and first-person narrative.”¹⁴ Tatiana Kokhanovskaia and Mikhail Nazarenko, too, argue that in processing twentieth-century history, contemporary Ukrainian prose turns to the personal experience, with writers approaching the historical process as a private past, whether personal or familial.¹⁵

Time and autobiography are implicated in one another, as the latter constitutes a subject’s attempt to place oneself chronologically, to make sense of a position within the pattern of timeframes. It is a means of narration that grants a present voice to a past event. The prefix “quasi,” as used by scholars in this context, signals that rather than producing a structured, mostly linear biography, the writers in question treat timeframes, facts, and interpretations playfully. With its focus on the temporal and the biographical, the field of memory studies is well-equipped to provide a lens for examining such tendencies.

Alongside the affinity for introspection, Kharkiv’s doubletake generation reveals another pattern—consistent preoccupation with, and even fetishization of, the notions of borders, boundaries and blurring. Despite the differences among them, these writers engage in persistent interrogation of space and frontiers. Their texts are, for all intents and purposes, placeful—that is, playful with places.¹⁶ They engage in the plotting of experience in terms of space, even when dealing with an imaginary experience like death. Memory, too, is cast as a place in such fiction—a location one can visit.

¹³ Vitaly Chernetsky, “From Anarchy to Connectivity to Cognitive Mapping: Contemporary Ukrainian Writers of the Younger Generation Engage with Globalization,” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 44 (2010): 109.

¹⁴ Alexander Dmitriev, “Miï Zhadan, abo nebo nad Khar’kovom,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 85 (2007), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2007/85/dm21.html>.

¹⁵ Tatiana Kokhanovskaia and Mikhail Nazarenko, “Ukrainskii vektor: istoriia s geografiei,” *Novyi mir* 12 (2012), 2013, http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2012/12/n22.html.

¹⁶ This formulation originates in a discussion with Rory Finnin.

To address this pervasive disorientation, notions get spatialized—presented as a system of locations, in line with the space-oriented thinking discussed earlier.¹⁷ However, blurred boundaries between these locations prevent them from becoming a set of coordinates, a stable map. Their frontiers are frequently indeterminable. Border studies is a discipline that has long been involved with understanding and interpreting the many kinds of frontiers that surround boundaries, including porous ones. This field of knowledge offers the language we need to approach such fluidity of delineation.

As contemporary Kharkiv literature demonstrates, the psychic experience in the city today is dominated by both space and time. Writers of the doubletake generation focus on navigating spatial concepts, with their affinity for the margins. But they are also concerned with endowing a subject with a place in time; thus their attraction to autobiography. Investigating these interconnected topics requires methodological correspondence. To address space and its connection to boundaries, I engage border studies. To address time and its connection to autobiography, I turn to memory studies. These two lenses are also useful in approaching the city itself, along with its literature. After all, “every city is a state of mind, and one hardly needs to stay there for this state of mind to communicate itself.”¹⁸

Sociologists often talk about the hybrid nature of the east and south areas of Ukraine, with their high percentages of bilingualism and fluid identities (discussed at length in the next chapter). The Kharkiv region, for one, is located near the border with Russia; it was about three-fourths Russophone at the start of this research.¹⁹ Moreover, in an interesting case of historical self-fashioning, residents of the region

¹⁷ For an exploration of the role of space in Ukrainian fiction in general, see Uilleam Blacker, “Representations of Space in Contemporary Ukrainian Literature” (PhD diss., University College London, 2011).

¹⁸ Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, trans. Philip Mosley (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2007), 73.

¹⁹ For data in percentages, see “Portret elektoratov Iushchenko i Ianukovicha,” *Kievskii tsentr politicheskikh issledovaniï i konfliktologii*, January 18, 2005, <http://www.analitik.org.ua/researches/archives/3dee44d0/41ecef0cad01e>.

themselves consistently position it as expressly multicultural.²⁰ If indeed Kharkiv is hybrid, then memory theory can be helpful in untangling its cultural currents. If Kharkiv is a borderland, then practitioners of border studies can be a source of definitions and observations that illuminate this aspect of the city.

This study combines interdisciplinary lenses to interpret the literary patterns surrounding blurred boundaries, their placefulness (both in space and in time), and the navigation mechanisms prompted by these conditions. As a concept, placefulness refers to the imagined geography of these border-transforming texts, where the underworld and the overworld are already loosely plotted, and where characters regularly push the limits of postmodernism's propensity to "inhabit the synchronic rather than diachronic."²¹ The "place" in placeful is a space endowed with sentiment and affect, making it a "center of felt value."²² We are dealing with what Edward Soja calls "an interpretive human geography, a spatial hermeneutic."²³ In other words, space is framed through social and cultural input.²⁴ Writers are imagining locations where boundaries are not fixed, where different timeframes are possible, and where space is reconfigured. Their texts, which search for ways to traverse such geography, are our guide to these locations.

In an essay subtitled "Zhanrovo-stylistychni vidminnosti novoï Kharkivs'koï literatury" (The genre-stylistic differences of new Kharkiv literature, 2012) Zhadan observes: "If you gather the texts of the living [in this city] and juxtapose them, you can always notice the signs that emerge at the junctions, in those places where one writer grows silent

²⁰ This preference has been affected by the war with Russia. For a discussion of such changes, see Tanya Zaharchenko, "A Ukrainian Thesaurus in Russian," in *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution*, ed. David R. Marples and Frederick V. Mills (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2015), 95–105. Also available in *The King's Review*, May 15, 2014, <http://kingsreview.co.uk/magazine/blog/2014/05/15/ukrainian-thesaurus>.

²¹ Jameson, "Postmodernism," 64.

²² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 4.

²³ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 1.

²⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

and another tries to speak up.”²⁵ This book seeks to examine how the articulated roots of storylines interlace within (or, perhaps as is more appropriate for roots, underneath) these junctions—if at all—while identifying and analyzing the blurred boundaries of the spatial *inside/outside* and the temporal *past/present* that abound in this fiction. Through this dual focus, I hope to tease out those written signs of the doubletake generation’s experience in a city that has long been one of the major players in Ukraine’s cultural arena.

Memory and literature

The study of memory involves a mosaic of fields that examine the social, cultural, and political processes affecting what, why, and how individuals and groups remember and forget. This growing subject encompasses history, political science, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, art studies, and social psychology. Despite such a transdisciplinary basis, its foundations remain rooted in the examination of the functions of memory in society, where traumas, narratives, victories, and losses—both real and imaginary—define perceptions of events and influence human behavior. The post-Soviet area, with its numerous (and often conflicting) narratives, contains a wealth of material for such research. The protracted effects of the Soviet Union’s collapse highlighted the importance of cultural memory studies to our understanding of processes taking place in the region today.

A vast body of literature is dedicated to memory studies, much of it beyond the scope of this project.²⁶ The field relies, in part, on the concept of collective memory, as coined by Maurice Halbwachs. In a hotly contested assertion, he argued that collective memory is constructed, shared, and transferred by a group of people. For our pur-

²⁵ Serhiy Zhadan, “Vykhid,” in *Potiah №111. Zbirka tvoriv pys’mennykhiv Kharkova ta L’vova*, ed. Andrei Krasniashchikh (Kharkiv: Folio, 2012), 42. Originally published as afterword to Serhiy Zhadan, ed., *Hoteli Kharkova: Antolohiia novoi kharkivs’koi literatury* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2008), 142–44.

²⁶ For a comprehensive overview of some important texts, see Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

poses, the most relevant part of Halbwachs's work is the belief that "even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu."²⁷ In other words, today is reflected in how yesterday is narrated. Or, as Paul Ricoeur observes in reference to Saint Augustine's thinking, memory is the present state of the past.²⁸ Approaching contemporary Kharkiv based on how its writers remember and represent their past is rooted in this notion.

The concept of collective memory has been developed and enhanced since its introduction in the first part of the twentieth century. Jan Assmann, for instance, expands it "from the realm of the psyche to the realm of the social and of cultural traditions."²⁹ He distinguishes between communicative and cultural memory. The former is rooted in everyday communication, changing as generations change, while the latter fulfills a more advanced storage function. With cultural memory, asserts Assmann, "the depths of time open up . . . at a point far beyond the horizon of communicative memory."³⁰ And the key to unlocking these depths of time is the written word. For the purposes of this study, an essential part of Assmann's framework is the decisive role it assigns to writing. He contends: "What writing makes possible is the perpetuation of memory, its liberation from the rhythms of forgetting and remembering."³¹

This liberation of memory through writing could be one way to shed light on complex social processes around the world. The proposed link between memory and literature is well articulated by Renate Lachmann, whose observation serves as an epigraph to this book's foreword. Literature, she argues, is more than a mere recording device. Rather, a text is a body of commemorative actions:

²⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 49.

²⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 31.

²⁹ Jan Assmann, "What Is 'Cultural Memory'?" in *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 9.

³⁰ Assmann, "What Is Cultural Memory," 9.

³¹ Assmann, "What Is Cultural Memory," 20.

The architecture of memory is replaced by the textual space of literature. The text traverses memory spaces and settles into them. . . . Literature is a mnemonic medium which not only creates new texts to be remembered but also recovers suppressed knowledge.³²

In applications of memory theory to the post-Soviet space, the recovery of the suppressed has been formulated as excavation: “Excavating the past buried in the present, the scholar of a postcatastrophic culture watches memory turning into imagination.”³³ This observation leads to a related notion: the dead cross the boundary back into life in post-Soviet literature and turn into the undead, due to “the post-Soviet economics of memory, where the losses are massive and the monuments in short supply.” This area of memory studies forms an important part of the theoretical background to my approach.

I submit, however, that the process of memory turning into imagination is not a one-way road—the inverse is also possible. Imagination, too, can turn into memory. In fact, Marie-Claire Lavabre maintains that the essential question in contemporary memory theory is whether memory can be shaped.³⁴ The idea of recovering or excavating memory can and should be interrogated, for it presumes that what has allegedly been buried remains largely unchanged upon reemergence.³⁵

³² Renate Lachmann, “Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature,” *European Review* 12 (2004): 173.

³³ Alexander Etkind, “Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction,” *Slavic Review* 68 (2009): 631.

³⁴ Marie-Claire Lavabre, “Historiography and Memory,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, ed. Aviezer Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 364.

³⁵ In this context, an interesting notion is that of desiring-production. Coined by French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L’Anti-Œdipe* (Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 1972), desiring-production counters the Freudian notion of the unconscious as a stage where existing (albeit hidden) things interact and play out. Instead, it is founded on “the most fundamental idea that the unconscious ‘produces.’” The authors maintain: “we must stop treating the unconscious, as everyone has done up to now, like some kind of theatre where a privileged drama is represented. . . . the unconscious is not a theatre, but a factory” (Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974* [Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004], 232).

This is a daring assumption, because “it is often quite easy to show major discrepancies between the image of the past shared by members of a particular social group, and the surviving records of that past.”³⁶

If we return to the rhetoric of maps in this context, then the maps laid out by recollections have a potentially deceptive nature: they aim not to direct through space, but to situate in time. As a result, they may include distortions, such as those of scale. Nevertheless, having taken the proper precautions against presuming to excavate some form of temporal truth, one can study memory turning into imagination and imagination turning into memory in order to observe how literature is formed. These dynamics are apparent in Raymond Williams’s assertion that, while society determines the writing of its literature, society is also not complete until its literature has been written and “can come through to stand as if on its own, with an intrinsic and permanent importance, so that we can see the rest of our living through it.”³⁷

In addition to the memory-imagination pathway, another theoretical route frequently misrepresented as a one-way street is the spatiotemporal one. The “breakdown of temporality”³⁸ in postmodern thought essentially places time on the altar of space. Much of the scholarly thinking on the subject has focused on this unilateral movement: the temporal turning into the spatial. For instance, Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), an influential concept in memory studies, relies on pausing time and crystallizing it in space, usually in the form of monuments. Nora argues that “the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* [is] to stop time, . . . to materialize the immaterial.”³⁹ Another important thinker in this field, Paul Connerton,

³⁶ Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 58.

³⁷ Raymond Williams, “Notes on English Prose: 1780–1950,” in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1991), 72. Arguably, the idea of seeing our living through literature resurfaces in Clifford Geertz’s suggestion that “a good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, . . .—takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation” (Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], 18).

³⁸ Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 73.

³⁹ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 19.

observes that memory “depends essentially upon a stable system of places.”⁴⁰ In Kharkiv’s doubletake literature, however, no such properties of one-way crystallization or stability can be discerned. Instead, it is filled with frontiers of indistinction. One may opt to apply coordinates to blurriness, but any success is unlikely to last. When memory and imagination get involved in post-traumatic cognitive positioning, therefore, the process is better understood as cognitive plotting.

Plotting implies a fluid, flexible kind of sketching, frequently involving assorted scattered points or dots in a nonlinear setting. This term reflects the nuances of orientation in uncertainty, as implied in conceptions such as Tupaia’s image of the Pacific Ocean. Tupaia, an eighteenth-century Polynesian navigator, dotted the ocean around Tahiti with islands that, as scholars maintain, may or may not have existed in reality. However, they did exist in the minds of those likely to sail there.⁴¹ As such, these islands would have influenced reality—the amount of provision a ship would pack for its journey, for instance—regardless of their materiality. This plotted or dotted take on one’s surroundings accommodates the fluctuating nature of the literary landscape under study. “The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space,” asserts Svetlana Boym.⁴² As this book demonstrates, so does the traumatic.

The connection between literature and memory remains hotly contested. How do we make use of the past we are essentially meant to abandon in time? How do writers make use of it? More research is needed to comprehensively address the question of whether fiction genuinely records, stores or reflects memory, as some scholars would argue. But regardless of whether imaginative writing serves to document or to distort things that are being remembered, what matters in the case of Kharkiv fiction is that—in its heavily autobiographical stance—it positions and represents itself as mnemonic. Authors write as if memory is accessible to them. At the core of my approach, then,

⁴⁰ Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

⁴¹ Michael R. Levison, Gerard R. Ward, and John W. Webb, *The Settlement of Polynesia: A Computer Simulation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 63.

⁴² Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *Hedgehog Review* 9 (2007): 9.

is not the insistence that literature is linked to memory through faithful reflection, but the fact that writers of the doubletake generation seem to treat it that way. They position their works as memory-rich, and critics often regard their works as memory-rich. This fiction is self-fashioning as legacy fiction, or literature of memory.

At the intersection of literature and memory, then, literature is an active force that can affect memory in many possible ways: it shapes, it conjures, it dilutes. In his analysis of the links between literature and ideology, Andrei Zorin asserts that the former can surpass, deform, or embody the latter.⁴³ A closer look at such processes can help a reader navigate imaginative writing by authors who choose to foreground the historical and cultural legacies of their place of origin. As they narrate the past or its fragments, this book unpacks these representations.

The effort to examine literature for memory, whether reflected or distorted, can be particularly fruitful with regard to the post-Soviet region, due to a feature Marietta Chudakova called literature-centricity (*literaturotsentrizm*).⁴⁴ The term refers to the central and defining role literature plays in the intellectual and cultural life of countries shaped by Soviet cultural institutions.⁴⁵ This framework treats literature as the principal tool for gathering, storing, and transferring historical memory—a situation rooted at least partly in the post-Soviet region's ideological past, which had placed scholarship in the humanities into a political context. Under such conditions, literary texts became “forms of historical memory and agents of political life.”⁴⁶ It could also be argued that literature-centricity in the region predates twentieth century and is rooted instead in Tsarist autocracy—

⁴³ Andrei Zorin, “Literatura i ideologiia,” in *Kormia dvuglavogo orla: Literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologiia v Rossii v poslednei treti XVIII – pervoi treti XIX veka* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004), 26.

⁴⁴ Marietta Chudakova, “Russkaia literatura XX veka: problema granits predmeta izucheniia,” *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 18 (2006), <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/18/chudakova18.shtml>.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of literature-centricity in Russia, for instance, see Igor' Kondakov, “Po tu storonu slova: Krizis literaturotsentrizma v Rossii XX – XXI vv.” *Voprosy literatury* 5 (2008): 5–44.

⁴⁶ Alexander Etkind, “The Shaved Man's Burden: The Russian Novel as a Romance of Internal Colonisation,” in *Critical Theory in Russia and the West*, ed. Alastair Renfrew and Galin Tihanov (New York: Routledge, 2010), 126.

citing, for instance, the romanticization of writing that took place when Adam Mickiewicz and Alexander Pushkin were exiled in the 1820s.⁴⁷ In the absence of civil society, literature takes up the space created by the vacuum that exists between society and the state.⁴⁸

In the social sciences, scholars such as Teun Adrianus van Dijk and Ruth Wodak formulate a similar idea. They note that modern societies place a particular emphasis on discursive fields—such as imaginative literature—that shape the practices of discourse around identity construction.⁴⁹ Combining the approach proposed by scholars of humanities with that of the social scientists, we arrive at the distinctive

⁴⁷ Originally arriving from the West (Russia's first writers were its state translators), literature in the Russian Empire proceeded to develop very differently due to a lack of similar social institutions, such as a parliament or independent press. Early on, literature turned into society's main way of conversing with the authorities; thus the proximity between the ruling and the literary voices (e.g., Emperor Alexander and Nikolai Karamzin; Joseph Stalin and Mikhail Bulgakov; Vladimir Putin and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn). Starting with Pushkin's pairing of the tsar and the prophet, literature became an important part of the legitimacy of political power. This led to the government's interference and control, which led in turn to the strengthening of the role of literary voices.

⁴⁸ The condition of literature-centricity is by no means limited to Russia. Scholars who focus on Ukraine have made similar observations about the role of the written word in Ukrainian culture today. Consider, for example, Alexander Dmitriev's argument that "the energy of cultural nation-building, like in nineteenth-century Russia, doubtlessly makes literature a more influential factor in contemporary Ukrainian life when compared to the role of the written word in Russian life" at the moment (Dmitriev, "Mii Zhadan"). Though framing this view as doubtless may overlook the potential complications of making so direct a link between nation-building and literature, this position was echoed by human rights activist Alekseï Korotaev: "In Russia, reading has become a matter of individual choices and preferences, as it should be. . . . But in Ukraine, the phenomenon of literature-as-self-definition is as acute as ever. What you read still matters on a level that extends beyond the mere fact of opening a book" (Alekseï Korotaev, interview by the author, January 8, 2011). This comparison, contrasted with the general decline of literature-centricity in Russia in the 1990s, is worth exploring in a separate project.

⁴⁹ Teun A. van Dijk, "Discourse, Knowledge and Ideology," in *Communicating Ideologies: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Language, Discourse, and Social Practice*, ed. Martin Pütz, JoAnne Neff, and Teun A. van Dijk (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 5–38; Ruth Wodak et al., eds., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

role of literature as a carrier of memory in many post-Soviet cultures, as well as a discursive field of identity construction in general.

The use of literature to explore identity, of course, is hardly unusual. Halfway across the world, Folke Lindahl calls it both appropriate and useful to “read an example of literature that reveals the tension inherent in such projects as finding one’s self, discovering one’s roots, and establishing one’s authentic identity.”⁵⁰ In this context, however, we may heed Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper’s warning about the sheer ambiguity of the term “identity,”⁵¹ and turn to scholars who emphasize the importance of creative writing in illuminating the social sphere in general:

[Fictional genres] generate narrative enactments that address and shape understandings. As such, they propose frames of reference for experiences that, even if fictive, are at least shared and common.⁵²

Lindahl suggests that both the Caribbean as a place and Caribbean writing as a body of literature are worlds engrossed in self-understanding, embodying a crisis of identity. As if in response to his analysis of the polyglot Caribbean voices, this book examines the bilingual Ukrainian ones—focusing on both the literature and the city of Kharkiv—in search of such “narrative enactments” and “frames of reference.”

The shimmer of frontiers

In the center of Kharkiv, a 1963 monument to Vladimir Lenin towered for half a century one of Europe’s largest urban plazas, Freedom Square (previously named after Felix Dzerzhinsky). The statue survived until

⁵⁰ Folke Lindahl, “Rewriting the Caribbean: Identity Crisis as Literature,” in *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities*, ed. Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 87.

⁵¹ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 1.

⁵² Bruno Bosteels, Loris Mirella, and Peter A. Schilling, “The Politics of Totality in Magic Realism,” in Shapiro and Alker, *Challenging Boundaries*, 111.

September 2014, when it was brought down in a live-streamed instance of *leninopad*, or *leninfall*.⁵³ The iconic constructivist design of Freedom Square itself is reminiscent of the Soviet 1920s and the period of industrialization. Meanwhile, on nearby Constitution Square (previously called the Square of Soviet Ukraine), a 1975 memorial to the Bolshevik revolutionaries of 1917 was recently replaced with Independence Monument, all set against the golden-domed backdrop of the Pokrovsky monastery.⁵⁴ Perhaps foreseeing such changes, one of the city's best-known writers, Zhadan, mused in 2011:

Maybe [the Lenin monument] will be removed one day after all, simply dismantled by a construction crane, and in its place they'll erect some allegoric figure that will, in the eyes of posterity, symbolize the successful completion of the national liberation struggle. To be honest, it's all the same to me, I never liked monuments . . . but if our ungrateful descendants remove this particular monument, this monument to illich, I will regret it. It features in too many good memories.⁵⁵

⁵³ For an example of media coverage, see Rick Noack, "What Toppled Lenin Statues Tell Us about Ukraine's Crisis," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/09/30/what-toppled-lenin-statues-tell-us-about-ukraines-crisis>.

⁵⁴ When in 2007 authorities started talking of removing the granite Bolsheviks from the 350-year-old square, Kharkivites happily took the opportunity to revive the old insider reference to the monument: the stone soldiers were colloquially known as "the five who carry a fridge from the pawnshop," or the pawnshop five (*piatero iz lombarda*). This name arises from a pawnshop located nearby until the 1970s (a high-profile criminal case involving its employees in 1948 had been dubbed "the pawnshop six"), as well as from the monument's peculiar angular composition. In 2011, as part of the memory wars and re-narration taking place in the newly independent territories, the pawnshop five were removed. The media used this local term when covering the event. See, e.g., "Zlokliucheniiia 'Piaterykh iz lombarda,'" *Media gruppа Ob'ektiv*, May 21, 2011, <http://www.objectiv.tv/210511/56208.html>, and "'Piaterykh iz lombarda' unesut svoi kholodil'nik na KhTZ," *Gorodskoi Dozor*, May 25, 2011, <http://dozor.kharkov.ua/1000981/exclusive/analytics2/1093984.html>.

⁵⁵ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 121. The author does not capitalize "illich", a patronymic-based reference to Lenin.

Between these two very different squares, along historic Sums'ka—the city's main street—a 1934 monument to Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, lovingly termed Sheva in certain Kharkivite circles,⁵⁶ looms over paths and fountains of the adjacent Shevchenko Park. Wandering past this park, one can turn into Radnarkomivs'ka Street (named after the Council of People's Commissars) and then veer left into Myronosyts'ka Street (named after a Christian Orthodox church that was destroyed here in 1930). Alternatively, one can veer right and walk through Victory Park towards Hohol Street, in honor of the great writer known in Russian as Gogol. In the latter case, one will soon reach Donets-Zakharzhevs'koho Street (named after a Cossack colonel of the late seventeenth century). And if one heads in the opposite direction along Sums'ka in the first place, one would soon come across a memorial stone to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, or the UPA.⁵⁷

Most of the inhabitants of this unofficial capital of the historic Sloboda region—east Ukraine's largest metropolis—have long grown accustomed to the remarkable combination of histories that permeate their city.⁵⁸ Its urban world is rife with regional and historical nuances that have, for centuries, steadily balanced it on the frontier of several cultures. Kharkiv is, in fact, often described in variations of “a city poised on the border in its identity building.”⁵⁹ It has a curious way of combining its location in the borderlands—a mere forty kilometers from Russia—with a role as one of the country's key urban centers: formerly political, always cultural. Indeed, as contemporary literary experts assert

⁵⁶ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 135.

⁵⁷ Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukraïn'ska povstans'ka armiia, or UPA) was the military wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists during World War II.

⁵⁸ Sloboda Ukraine is a historical region that covers the northeast of today's Ukraine and the southwest of the Central Chernozem region of today's Russia. Its name, Sloboda, is believed to be related to the West and South Slavic version of the East Slavic *svoboda* (freedom), reflecting its inhabitants' special status at the time of settling. “In the olden times, sloboda was a name for a settlement of free peoples,” notes the *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, www.vehi.net/brokgauz/.

⁵⁹ John J. Czaplicka et al., “What Time Is This Place? Locating the Post-socialist City,” in *Cities after the Fall of Communism: Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity*, ed. John J. Czaplicka et al. (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009), 5.

in a historical overview, virtually the entire history of Ukrainian literature at its high points is, to various degrees, connected with Kharkiv.⁶⁰

Kharkiv writer and literary scholar Andreï Krasniashchikh describes his city as a “shimmering phenomenon (*mertsaiushchee iavlenie*) that exists and does not exist in the same instant,” alluding in part to the unique array of attributes that have formed it over the course of recent centuries.⁶¹ Writer Yuri Andrukhovych also appeals to a set of transcendent characteristics when mentioning Kharkiv in *Leksykon intymnykh mist* (The lexicon of intimate cities, 2011). He associates it with “illusions, utopias, progress, and the speed of sound,” as well as with “punk-music, the poetry of despair, and proletarian melancholy,”—all in all, with “something much bigger than you could have imagined.”⁶² Scholars of literature echo this sense in their analysis of the city’s literary landscape: “Despite a mere 350 years of the history of [Sloboda Ukraine], on our imaginary literary map of the world this territory looks like a multi-layered borderland (*vygliadit mnogoslōnym pogranich’em*) of various cultures and even civilizations.”⁶³

This section takes a closer look at Kharkiv’s distinctive combination of traits, showing why some of its top contemporary writers, working in both Ukrainian and Russian, have placed it under the constellation of Ukraine’s Southern Railways.⁶⁴ In Krasniashchikh’s original phrasing, “a shimmering transit city”, the shimmer referred to visibility—a city that is there and not quite there, depending on when and where one looks, as well as what one looks for.⁶⁵ But shimmering can also refer to light, in terms of attractiveness and glimmer, as well as to change, fluidity, vacillation. And to the way water shimmers when

⁶⁰ Rostyslav Mel’nykiv and Yuri Tsaplin, “Severo-vostok iugo-zapada: o sovremennoi khar’kovskoi literature,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 85 (2007), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2007/85/me20.html>.

⁶¹ Konstantin Beliaev and Andreï Krasniashchikh, *Khar’kov v zerkale mirovoi literatury* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2007), 4.

⁶² Yuri Andrukhovych, *Leksykon intymnykh mist* (Chernivtsi: Meridian Czernewitz, 2011), 436–37.

⁶³ Mel’nykiv and Tsaplin, “Severo-vostok.”

⁶⁴ Serhiy Zhadan, “NEP,” in *Tsyatnyk* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2005).

⁶⁵ According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, to shimmer is “to reflect a wavering sometimes distorted visual image,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shimmer>.

currents pass beneath its surface. Vladimir Dal's nineteenth-century *Tolkovyĭ slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka* (Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language), contextualizing it as "to shine with a trembling light," and links it to the verb *merknut'*—to fade.⁶⁶ A shimmer attracts one's attention, but it may or may not be there—its substance is uncertain. It is a potent, wide-ranging word, and it applies to Kharkiv in all variations of its meaning: the ability to yield the traits one looks for (whether Ukrainian or Russian, for instance), the attraction of that strange "something much bigger than you could have imagined," and the state of fluidity that writers like Krasniashchikh, Tsaplin, Zhadan and others pick up on when they weave roads, railways, and train stations—all sorts of relocations and movement—into their texts.

Originally, Sloboda Ukraine was administered by independent Cossack regiments. Kharkiv was founded in 1654, and the area remained autonomous until 1732. In literature, one of the first images of Kharkiv found in the texts of Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnov'ianenko and later authors is that of a free settlement (*vil'ne poselennia*).⁶⁷ This region lay for centuries at the crossroads of settlement flows from Russia and Ukraine,⁶⁸ and a description of Kharkiv as a mercurial transit city (*tranzitnyi gorod*) is not uncommon today.⁶⁹ With the Ukrainian-Russian border a few dozen kilometers away, the area is indeed a conglomeration of a fairly cross-cultural population. Most of it is inherently bilingual, and the majority (74 percent) speaks Russian as a native language, although strong Ukrainophone currents are present here as well.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ "Mertsat', slabo sverkat', siiat' blednym libo drozhashchim svetom; probleskivat', prosvechivat', igrat' iskorkami, perelivom, peremezhkom," http://slovari.yandex.ru/~книги/Толковый_словарь_Даля/МЕРКНУТЬ.

⁶⁷ Oleksii Musiiezdzov, *Kharkivs'ka identychnist': uivlennia pro misto ta ioho istoriiu iak chynnyky identyfikatsii* (Lviv: Ece-Urban, 2009), 5.

⁶⁸ Dmytro Bahalii, *Istoriia Slobids'koï Ukraïny* (Kharkiv: Osnova, 1990), 236. First published 1918.

⁶⁹ Andrei Krasniashchikh, interview by the author, April 17, 2011. See also Vladimir Fedorov, Igor' Nazarenko, and Tamara Bel'skaia, "Merkurii kak mif i emblema Khar'kova," *Russkii zhurnal*, March 16, 2007, <http://www.russ.ru/layout/set/print/pole/Merkurij-kak-mif-i-emblema-Har-kova>.

⁷⁰ These currents have been enhanced by the war with Russia. For pre-war statistics, see "Portret elektorotov," *Kievskii tsentr politicheskikh issledo-*

The first capital of Soviet Ukraine (1919–34), Kharkiv has played a leading role in the country's cultural and academic development. Ukraine's first modern university was established here in 1805, turning the city into the center of a massive educational region. This self-fashioning as both periphery and center is one of Kharkiv's most curious traits. It surfaces, for example, in Zhadan's novel *Voroshylivhrad*, which treats east Ukraine's vast expanses of land both as endlessly empty and, at the same time, as remarkably full of life. Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian cultures influenced the new university, which in turn stimulated local literature, theatre, and journalism.⁷¹ The country's very first Russophone literary magazine, *Khar'kovskii demokrat*, was published in Kharkiv in 1816. Kvitka-Osnov'ianenko was among its many writers.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, due to geopolitical changes in the region, the city acquired an advantageous position at the crossroads of trading routes, which resulted in stable growth and turned it into a cultural hub. Around this time, Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinsky called Kharkiv "the capital of Ukrainian literature, of Ukrainian prose and poetry."⁷² Izmail Sreznevsky, a folklorist, philologist and heritage-gatherer who became an important figure of the Ukrainian literary revival, graduated from Kharkiv University in 1829 and became a professor there in 1842. Nikolai Kostomarov, a distinguished Russian

vanii i konfliktologii. See also Evgenii Kanevskii, "Russkie i Ukraina: ne natsional'nost', a iazyk," BBC, July 17, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/in_depth/newsid_6904000/6904180.stm. Mykola Riabchuk suggests, however, that neither "language of preference" nor "native tongue" are enough to reflect the situation accurately, as one-third of the country's population moves in and out of using both languages according to circumstances. Mykola Riabchuk, "Civil Society and Nation Building in Ukraine," in *Contemporary Ukraine: Dynamics of Post-Soviet Transformation*, ed. Taras Kuzio (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 89.

⁷¹ Volodymyr Kravchenko maintains that "during its ascendancy to the status of the university center, Kharkiv managed to surpass all its main rivals—Sumy, Katerynoslav, Chernihiv, Poltava, and Kiev" (Volodymyr Kravchenko, "Kharkiv: A Borderland City," in *Cities after the Fall of Communism: Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity*, ed. John J. Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, and Blair A. Ruble [Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009], 222).

⁷² Vissarion Belinsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 13 tomakh*, t. 7 (Moscow: Izd. AN SSSR, 1953–59), 280–82.

and Ukrainian historian who described Russians and Ukrainians as two nationalities, belonged to the Kharkiv Romantic School and studied at the University.⁷³ Members of the Romantic School—Sreznevsky, Kostomarov, Amvrosiï Metlyn's'kyï, Oleksandr Korsun, and others—published sophisticated literary almanacs in Ukrainian, focusing on Ukraine's ethnography, history, and poetry. Mid-nineteenth century Kharkiv—with its University as the center of the Romantic movement—gave birth to the modern Ukrainian national idea.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the city underwent vast modernization and became one of the largest cultural and industrial hubs of the Russian Empire. For years it served as a major center of Ukrainian scholarship and publishing activities. In the 1930s Kharkiv was known as a Literary Klondike (a reference to the gold-rich region in northwestern Canada; the origins of this formulation in reference to Kharkiv appear to be lost in history). Luminaries such as Pavlo Fylypovych, Mykola Khvylovy, Mykola Kulish, Les Kurbas, Valerian Pidmohyl'nyi, Oleksa Slisarenko, and Mykola Zerov called it home. It was from Kharkiv that Khvylovy launched his Literary Discussion on the future of Ukraine and its writers.⁷⁴ Over one hundred of these writers were repressed and executed during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. They are now known as the Executed Renaissance.⁷⁵

The Executed Renaissance was among several immense blows to befall Kharkiv in the twentieth century. World War II destroyed seventy

⁷³ The trajectory of Kostomarov's thought on Russians and Ukrainians was complex. In his *Books of Genesis of the Ukrainian People* he described them as two nations destined for fulfilment as "free republics" in a federation of similarly free Slavic states. Later, after his arrest and exile, he wrote of them as two parts of the one whole—most extensively in his essay "Two Rus' Nationalities". I am grateful to Marko Pavlyshyn for his expertise on this topic. For more, see Thomas M. Prymak, *Mykola Kostomarov: A Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

⁷⁴ For a thorough analysis of the Literary Discussion, see Myroslav Shkandrij, *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation: The Ukrainian Literary Discussion of the 1920s* (Edmonton University of Alberta Press, 1992); Mykola Khvylovy, *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine: Polemical Pamphlets, 1925-1926*, trans. Miroslav Shkandrij (Edmonton Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1986).

⁷⁵ This term originates with Yuri Lavrinenko, who studied in Kharkiv. It is the title of his anthology: Yuri Lavrinenko, ed., *Rozstriliane vidrodzhennia: antolohiia 1917-1933* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1959).

percent of the city and killed about a third of its prewar population, making it one of the most demolished places in the whole of Europe. Over the next few decades Kharkiv slowly regained power and influence, though arguably it has yet to fully recover from the trauma of violence it endured.

Today, Kharkiv's bilingual literary scene is flourishing. But although the city's nineteenth and early twentieth century literature has received a fair amount of scholarly attention,⁷⁶ in the post-Soviet period Kharkiv attracts mostly social scientists seeking to explore its unique gateway position from the point of view of cultural geography. A gap in the scholarship has emerged: a place that was previously studied by literary scholars and historians of literature is now largely the focus of the social sciences.⁷⁷ Research dedicated specifically to Kharkiv's contemporary literature remains scarce, although post-Soviet Ukrainian literature as a whole has featured in a number of insightful texts.⁷⁸ And yet, as historian Volodymyr Masliichuk asserts, "For Ukrainian culture and national identity, Kharkiv appears so significant

⁷⁶ See, for example, George Luckyj, "The Battle for Literature in the Soviet Ukraine: A Documentary Study of Vaplite, 1925–1928," *Harvard Slavic Studies* 3 (1957): 227–46; Shkandrij, *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation*; Taras Koznarsky, "Kharkiv Literary Almanacs of the 1830s: Shaping Ukrainian Cultural Identity" (PhD diss., University of Harvard, 2001).

⁷⁷ There is little cross-disciplinary communication in border studies, a topic discussed in the next section of this introduction. With the notable exception of Latin America, humanities-based contributions to this field so far have been relatively uncommon. Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly lists the disciplines involved: "The ranks of border scholars have expanded from geographers, historians and economists to include anthropologists, ethnologists, political scientists, lawyers, psychologists, sociologists and other social scientists." See Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, "Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective," *Geopolitics* 10 (2005): 634.

⁷⁸ E.g., Mark Andryczyk, *The Intellectual as Hero in 1990s Ukrainian Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Tamara Hundorova, *Pisliachornobyl's'ka biblioteka: Ukraïns'kyi literaturnyi postmodern* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2005); Marko Pavlyshyn, "The Rhetoric of Geography in Ukrainian Literature, 1991–2005," in *Ukraine, the EU and Russia: History, Culture and International Relations*, ed. Stephen Velychenko (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 89–107.

that no other city, except perhaps its two competitors Kyiv and Lviv, can be compared to it.”⁷⁹

Given this background, the aim of this book is twofold: first, to fill the research gap by examining contemporary Kharkiv literature as a body of placeful texts, and second, to bridge the disciplines involved. The approaches of literary analysis, combined with the theoretical foundations of memory studies and border studies, create a transdisciplinary lens: a glance at borderland literature. This literature foregrounds a consistent ambiguity of margins and unusual overlaps between seemingly different, or even opposite, notions. It is also heavily infused with the authors’ own experiences and reflections. This linking of humanities and social sciences can help illuminate the setting in which these two literary patterns have emerged—a setting where, as David Ley observes, “growing cultural diversity *within* nation-states, and particularly within gateway cities, is an unavoidable certainty.”⁸⁰

After Moscow and Leningrad, Kharkiv—not Kyiv—was widely considered to be the Soviet Union’s third city.⁸¹ As the third largest megapolis in the USSR before World War II, it served as a major transport hub of southeastern Europe.⁸² Today, its sixty-nine institutions of higher education accommodate over two hundred thousand students, a number larger than Ukraine’s armed forces in 2012.⁸³ This, too, provides the city with a young and highly mobile population, to the extent that Zhadan jokes: “There are so many students here that, when they disappear, you suddenly begin to notice the great number of city

⁷⁹ Volodymyr Masliichuk, *Provintsiiia na perekhresty kul'tur. Doslidzhennia z istorii Slobids'koï Ukraïni XVIII–XIX st.* (Kharkiv: Kharkivs'kyi pryvatnyi muzei mis'koï sadyby, 2007), 341.

⁸⁰ David Ley, “Postmulticulturalism?” in *Immigration and Integration in Urban Communities: Renegotiating the City*, ed. Lisa M. Hanley, Blair A. Ruble, and Allison M. Garland (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008), 178 (italics in the original).

⁸¹ Kravchenko, “Kharkiv: A Borderland City,” 227.

⁸² Valerii Vokhmianin and Alexander Podoprigora, *Khar'kov, 1941–i. Chast' vtoraia: gorod v ogne* (Kharkiv: Raider, 2009).

⁸³ See “Kharkiv—students'ka stolitsia,” Kharkivs'ka mis'ka rada, <http://www.city.kharkov.ua/uk/o-xarkove/xarkov-studencheskaya-stolicza.html> and “Pro chysel'nist' Zbroinykh Syl Ukraïny na 2012 rik,” *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukraïny* 19–20 (2012), 175.

freaks.”⁸⁴ Kharkiv is a gateway indeed; the question is, what kinds of currents pass through it?

Where currents meet

In his work on applications of urban theory to Kharkiv, Masliichuk notes that an urban community has its own thinking about itself, often shaped by the city’s intellectual visionaries.⁸⁵ Some of these visionaries, writers who live and work in Kharkiv, develop a conscious sense of themselves “as part of a *special* Eastern European space,” argues Dmitriev in his analysis of Zhadan’s connection to this city.⁸⁶ Alexander Kratochvil highlights the region’s postmodern sense of homeland, particularly as recreated in *Voroshylivhrad*. This alternative model of Ukraine, he submits, generates a particular transcultural space (*transkul’turnyi prostir*).⁸⁷

This space arises at the intersection of cultures and languages in the Russian-Ukrainian borderlands, heightened by Kharkiv’s vibrant cultural life, which naturally draws these currents into consistent interplay and interaction. What is intriguing about Kharkiv’s *transkul’turnyi prostir* is that the city’s population consciously establishes this characteristic of heterogeneity as a value, and presents itself in accordance with this value. Other places around Ukraine may well be close to the border and multinational, but their residents do not tend to fashion themselves pointedly in this manner. If anything, the push-and-pull of adaptation would be unwelcome in the self-imagery of cities portrayed as strongholds of Ukrainian culture. It is primarily in Kharkiv that writers create texts explicitly representing their region as hybrid and diverse—in essence, as an intrinsic borderland.

Before discussing this any further, however, let us be clear about what is meant by borders and borderlands. As a discipline, border

⁸⁴ Zhadan, “Pechal’ni demony okruzhnoï,” in *Potiah*, 43.

⁸⁵ Masliichuk, *Provintsia na perekhresty kul’tur*.

⁸⁶ Dmitriev, “Mii Zhadan” (italics in the original).

⁸⁷ Alexander Kratochvil, “Nazad do novoï bat’kivshchyny,” trans. Vasyl’ Lozyns’kyi, *Krytyka* 9–10 (2010), <http://krytyka.com/ua/articles/nazad-do-novoyi-batkivshchyny>.

studies proposes a counter-narrative to the notion of a world without limits, which was formulated as part of globalization theory.⁸⁸ While global studies focuses on the diminishing of international borders, border theory sprung up to examine processes specific to borderlands. The term “borderlands,” as scholars asserted twenty years ago, “does not indicate a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales (nations, societies, cultures), but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject.”⁸⁹ Framing Kharkiv as a zone of displacement or deterritorialization would be an inaccurate way to approach the wholeness and complexity of the *transkul’turnyi prostir* it contains. But it is true that a border city is more than a topographical in-between locale. In essence, border studies recognizes complex overlapping frontiers where some perceive mere lines of demarcation.

Major recent changes in geographical outlines—such as the transformation of the Soviet Union into fifteen separate countries in 1991, or the Fifth Enlargement of the European Union in 2004—catalyzed the growth of interest in border studies. The latest approaches to this topic have assumed the perspective of cultural anthropology.⁹⁰ In doing so, they challenge older and more traditional notions about contact zones and identities⁹¹—for instance, the centralist paradigm of the Soviet era.⁹² Peter Sahlins points out that “focusing on how the nation was imposed and built from the center outward . . . denies the role of local communities and social groups in shaping their own national identities.”⁹³

⁸⁸ David Newman and Anssi Paasi, “Fences and Neighbours in the Post-Modern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography,” *Progress in Human Geography* 22 (1998): 186–207.

⁸⁹ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1992): 18.

⁹⁰ David Newman, “Borders and Bordering: Towards an Interdisciplinary Dialogue,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 2 (2006): 171–86.

⁹¹ See, for example, Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, eds., *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁹² Mark von Hagen, “Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-Paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era,” *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 445–68.

⁹³ Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 8.

Scholars have begun to emphasize that any analysis of social or political issues should start not with how territory influences people, but with how people construct territory.⁹⁴

The earliest systematic studies of borders during the first half of the twentieth century focused mostly on physical boundaries, either natural or man-made.⁹⁵ A shift of spotlight onto the actual functions of borders took place shortly thereafter, with a debate about whether they foster or calm tensions between countries.⁹⁶ With time, borders were identified as institutional constructs central to the development of nation-states.⁹⁷ And recent scholarship has focused, among other things, on the culture of borderland communities. It became apparent that these communities could either enhance the effect of divided territory when their culture differs⁹⁸ or bridge an international boundary when their culture is similar or shared.⁹⁹

To summarize, borders used to be considered an instrument that allowed nations to defend their interests, helping form and protect identities.¹⁰⁰ They have since become an integral part of studying the shifting, fluid processes known as identity politics.¹⁰¹ In 2005, acknowledging this changing approach, Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly wrote that “the unifying, symbolic, dividing and exclusionary role of a border as a founding principle of a sovereign state is currently under

⁹⁴ Iver B. Neumann, “Encompassing Russia. North or East of Central?” in *Identity Dynamics and the Construction of Boundaries*, ed. Bo Petersson and Eric Clark (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003).

⁹⁵ Julian Minghi, “Review Article: Boundary Studies in Political Geography,” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 53 (1963): 407–28.

⁹⁶ Brunet-Jailly, “Theorizing Borders,” 636.

⁹⁷ Anssi Paasi, “The Political Geography of Boundaries at the End of the Millennium: Challenges of the De-Territorializing World,” in *Curtain of Iron and Gold: Reconstructing Borders and Scales of Interaction*, ed. Heikki Esklinen, Ikka Liikanen, and Jukka Oksa (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 9–24.

⁹⁸ Brunet-Jailly, “Theorizing Borders,” 638.

⁹⁹ Andre Reitel et al., *Villes et Frontières* (Paris: Economica, 2002).

¹⁰⁰ Ulf Riber Hedetoft, “The Politics of Belonging and Migration in Europe: Raisons d’Etat and the Borders of the National,” in *Identity Dynamics and the Construction of Boundaries*, ed. Bo Petersson and Eric Clark (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003).

¹⁰¹ Identity politics were first described briefly by L. A. Kauffman in “The Anti-Politics of Identity,” *Socialist Review* 20 (1990): 67–80.

pressure.”¹⁰² Today, the area surrounding a border is its own full-fledged zone of academic focus.

Border scholars have been particularly keen to explore Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities.¹⁰³ This idea has been evoked by a number of them; for instance, Hans Knippenberg argues that a state territory rarely covers a homogeneous population and therefore always has to imagine one.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, bordering processes depend on the active participation of the population rather than on spatial demarcation, contend Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen.¹⁰⁵ Curiously, although these scholars also suggest that the edges of cities or countries represent disorder, loss, and tiredness, Kharkiv is quite the opposite. It is a vibrant place, “an interesting combination of (remaining) cultural closeness and (growing) social and economic differences between the two bordering territories.”¹⁰⁶ Hence, some contemporary border theories appear to be applicable to it, while others less so.

Perhaps the most useful border studies language for Kharkiv’s situation is found in Oscar J. Martínez’s work on the US-Mexican border. Martínez outlines four possible models of interaction between borderlands: alienation, coexistence, interdependence, and integration. Both ends of the proposed spectrum—alienation (where tension prevails and interaction is absent) and integration (where the economies are merged and movement is unrestricted)—can reasonably be eliminated from the attempt to understand the Sloboda region. The two middle models, however, are of interest. Coexistent borderlands come with an “on-and-off” stability and a slightly open border. Interdepen-

¹⁰² Brunet-Jailly, “Theorizing Borders,” 639.

¹⁰³ In brief, a nation is constructed by those who perceive themselves as a part of it. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁰⁴ Hans Knippenberg, “Assimilating Jews in Dutch Nation-Building: The Missing ‘Pillar,’” *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 93 (2002): 191–207.

¹⁰⁵ Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, “Bordering, Ordering and Othering,” *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 93 (2002): 126.

¹⁰⁶ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Cross-Border Cooperation and Transformation of Regional Identities in the Ukrainian-Russian Borderlands: Towards a Euro-region ‘Slobozhanshschyna’? Part 2,” *Nationalities Papers* 32 (2004), 497.

dent borderlands, by contrast, feature stability “most of the time,” as well as “economic and social complementarity.”¹⁰⁷

With regard to the Kharkiv oblast (region) I would be inclined to lean toward the former—a framework that allows for the two countries’ residents to treat each other as acquaintances while borderlanders may develop closer relationships. This nuanced position reflects the complexity of the relationship between Ukraine and Russia better than the clear-cut “friendly and cooperative” interaction of the interdependent model, especially in light of recent developments.¹⁰⁸ Due to the attentiveness to fluidity in Martínez’s classification, understanding Sloboda as a coexistent borderland allows for the people living in this region to feel differently about the neighboring country than the center dwellers might.¹⁰⁹

A scholar focusing on the Russian-Georgian border has pointed out “the discrepancy between the rhetoric of central authorities and the actual practices of border dwellers.”¹¹⁰ Such points of view accentuate the border as a zone of interaction rather than of division.¹¹¹ According to one of the existing approaches to this zone of interaction, borders can be hard or soft, as determined by the level of crossing control and the quality of neighborly relations.¹¹² This, in turn, determines the characteristics of the adjacent borderlands. Conceptual approaches that treat both sides of a border as a whole, distinct from the respective centers¹¹³—as

¹⁰⁷ Oscar Jáquez Martínez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ongoing armed conflict in east Ukraine complicates the effort of applying any system of classification to borderlands at war.

¹⁰⁹ Border dwellers themselves can and do vary in their attitudes toward their neighbors: “Some borderlanders are situated at the center of the border experience, others are distant from it, and many people occupy positions in between” (Martínez, *Border People*, viii).

¹¹⁰ Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 215.

¹¹¹ Henk Driessen, *On the Spanish-Moroccan Frontier: A Study in Ritual, Power and Ethnicity* (Oxford: Berg, 1992), 190.

¹¹² Nanette Neuwahl, “What Borders for Which Europe?” in *Soft or Hard Borders? Managing the Divide in an Enlarged Europe*, ed. Joan DeBardeleben (Aldershot Ashgate, 2005).

¹¹³ See, for instance, Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, “Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands,” *Journal of World History* 8 (1997): 211–42.

well as studies that reveal that the border is often a zone where two or more entities overlap¹¹⁴—are applicable to Kharkiv. Its local border may be called a soft one in the language of border studies. Prior to the eruption of conflict in 2014, it commonly attracted terms such as open, communicative, inclusive, as well as metaphors like “linking bridges.”¹¹⁵

Of course, Ukraine itself can be viewed as a composite of historical and political borderlands: Polish-Lithuanian, Austro-Hungarian, Tatar-Ottoman, as well as Muscovite-Russian-Soviet. Anna Reid claims that “*Ukraina* is literally translated as ‘on the edge’ or ‘borderland,’ and that is exactly what it is.”¹¹⁶ A number of other cities in Ukraine may be described as balanced on the frontier of cultures, especially those located near the national borders. It is in the country’s southern and eastern lands, however, that researchers have identified a sizeable population of individuals with hybrid national identities: 51 percent in the Donbas region and 43 percent in Kharkiv or Dnipropetrovsk, for instance.¹¹⁷

Although the theoretical basis of the concept of borderlands requires further elaboration and development, it has turned out to be of particular interest to scholars focusing on Ukraine, in light of Ukraine’s experience as a vast historical and cultural frontier. This was enthusiastically picked up and employed by those whose research involves Kharkiv. As a notion, borderlands is key to much of the social scientists’ work on Kharkiv; in fact, it figures in the titles of several

¹¹⁴ Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 215.

¹¹⁵ Ol’ga Filippova, “Granitsa i pogranič’e v kontekste politik identichnosti,” in *Metodologhiia, teoriia ta praktyka sotsiologichnoho analizu suchasnoho suspil’sstva* (Kharkiv: KhNU im. V. N. Karazina, 2010), 398.

¹¹⁶ Anna Reid, *Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 1. An interesting discussion in this context might address why the etymology of the word “Ukraine” seems so relevant to this day. Not too many people, for instance, would refer to the origin of the word “America” to explain or describe something about the United States. The notion of what Reid presents as “on the edge,” it seems, is fused to Ukraine through its name—for better or for worse. At times, this situation induces curious cases of etymological bias.

¹¹⁷ Mikhail Pogrebinskiĭ, ed., *Politicheskie nastroyeniia nakanune vyborov. Ukraina, dekabr’ 1997* (Kyiv: Kievskii tsentr politicheskikh issledovaniĭ i konfliktologii, 1998).

recent monographs.¹¹⁸ The academic portion of the city's intellectual visionaries, to use Masliūchuk's formulation, continually reflects on (and, through publications, shapes) its frontier-inspired image. And creative writers have reserved a particular role for boundaries in their fiction as well.

Why so? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that borders became a geopolitical reality for Kharkiv for the first time in 1991. National perimeters have passed over cities like Kyiv, Lviv, or Odesa in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even twentieth century. These cities, arguably, are not unaccustomed to the changes that accompany the shifting of a geographical center—a country's official capital moving from the west to the east of a city, for instance, as was the case with Warsaw and Moscow for Lviv. Kharkiv, however, has enjoyed a fairly stable relationship to its nearest border, always to its east. When that border turned from an inexplicit mental line between Ukrainian SSR and Russian SSR to an international frontier separating the independent state of Ukraine from the Russian Federation, Kharkiv became the cultural megapolis dealing most recently with the immediacy of a new (inter)national delineation in a postmodern context. In other words, because the city's previous frontier experience was relatively anchored and porous until 1991, the role of the border gained a profound significance here in post-Soviet time. This is one possible explanation for the fact that, despite the border's geopolitical stability, it is highly present in the city's cultural space.

In 2004, social scientist Tatiana Zhurzhenko argued that this boundary's legitimacy was questionable in popular consciousness.¹¹⁹ Although more than a decade has passed since her analysis of the situation, and although strong proboundary cultural and political forces are active today, it remains true that in general, the ethnographic boundary between Russian and Ukrainian settlements is not as visible

¹¹⁸ For example, Tatiana Zhurzhenko, *Borderlands into Bordered Lands: Geopolitics of Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2010); Kravchenko, *Kharkov/Kharkiv: stolitsa Pogranich'ia* (Vilnius: European Humanitarian University, 2010).

¹¹⁹ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Cross-Border Cooperation and Transformation of Regional Identities in the Ukrainian-Russian Borderlands: Towards a Euro-region 'Slobozhanshschyna'? Part 1," *Nationalities Papers* 32 (2004): 207.

now as it was in the beginning of the twentieth century.¹²⁰ A 2002 survey of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that supporters of state independence (78 percent of respondents) consisted of 64 percent who favored an open border between Ukraine and Russia, and only 14 percent who preferred a “normal” border with visas and custom control.¹²¹ More recently, in 2008, an open border was still favored by 59.3 percent of respondents.¹²² Ascribing this position to all Kharkivites would certainly be an exaggeration, especially today, in the context of war. But in general, Volodymyr Kravchenko’s observation holds: “The national identity of Kharkiv’s mixed Ukrainian-Russian population usually acquired a hybrid, complex, inclusive, and multi-faceted quality, where premodern and modern components of identity were intertwined.”¹²³

It is important to note, however, that intertwining is very different from blending. It is, rather, an overlap of things that may be perceived as different, or even opposite. This is one of the fascinating attributes of borderlands: they tend to be “a place of incommensurable contradictions.”¹²⁴ Along with abovementioned processes of inclusivity, strong currents of Ukrainian national consciousness are a fundamental part of Kharkiv’s history: “Every weakening and/or

¹²⁰ Zhurzhenko, “Cross-Border Cooperation, Part 2,” 497.

¹²¹ Mykhaïlo Mishchenko and Valeriy Khmelko, “Dynamika stavlennia hromadian Ukraïny do problem Ukraïno-rosiï’s’kykh vidnosyn,” Kyivs’kyi mizhnarodnyi instytut sotsiologii, www.kiis.com.ua/130303/main.html. When a similar question was posed to the public in 2003 by the Kyiv Center of Political Studies and Conflictology, the answers were analogous: 11 percent of the respondents wished to see the Ukrainian-Russian relations “the same as with other countries—closed borders, visas and customs,” and 59 percent voted for the two nations to remain independent while maintaining special relations and open borders. See “Mnieniia naseleniia po povodu otnosheniï Ukraïny i Rosiï,” Kievskii tsentr politicheskikh issledovaniï i konfliktologii, <http://www.analitik.org.ua/researches/archives/3dee44d0/3f8ab63fad202>.

¹²² “Stavlennia Ukraïns’kykh hromadian do Rosiï ta NATO: cherez misiats’ opislia kavkaz’koho konfliktu,” Tsentr Sotsial’nykh Issledovaniï SOFIIA, <http://new.sofia.com.ua/page83.html>. The ultimate effect of the Russo-Ukrainian war on such questionnaires is unclear, with events still under way.

¹²³ Kravchenko, “Kharkiv: A Borderland City,” 223.

¹²⁴ Gupta and Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture,’” 18.

democratization of the [Russian] empire led to yet another/permanent renaissance of Ukrainian culture in Kharkiv—significant not only locally, but also on the all-Ukrainian scale.”¹²⁵ Today, these currents are on the rise again.

The case of Kharkiv demonstrates that borders are not synonymous with margins. The concept of borderlands itself carries particular geopolitical connotations: it implies a certain lack of sovereignty and presumes the main perspective to be from a center, which is located elsewhere. In cities like Kharkiv, however, a shift of the center of gravity to the periphery—which functions as a center of its own—is an intriguing and important process to observe. Indeed, scholars who work on the concept of borderlands have asserted:

Rather than dismissing [the borderlands] as insignificant, as marginal zones, thin slivers of land between stable places, we want to contend that the notion of borderlands is a more adequate conceptualization of the “normal” locale of the postmodern subject.¹²⁶

In line with such reasoning, this study approaches Kharkiv’s location and its cultural effects as a full-fledged—and noteworthy—source of the human experience in urban environments. Examining how the city’s imaginative literature incorporates and processes the complexities that came its way in the past century—not least of which is the Russian-Ukrainian linguistic and cultural hybridity—I interpret contemporary Kharkiv fiction as one possible carrier of this region’s self-articulated position as a “bearer of a special historical experience.”¹²⁷

Literature contains, among other things, an articulation of issues and viewpoints relevant to a portion of the population—as evidenced by the writers’ effort to express these things and the readers’ interest in gaining access to that expression. To a degree, this perspective benefits from Raymond Williams’s notion of a “structure of feeling,” which describes “a particular quality of social experience [that] gives the

¹²⁵ Mel’nykiv and Tsaplin, “Severo-vostok.”

¹²⁶ Gupta and Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture,’” 18.

¹²⁷ Zhurzhenko, “Cross-Border Cooperation, Part 2,” 508.

sense of a generation or of a period.”¹²⁸ This book does not purport to penetrate the consciousness of one city’s population. However, it does seek to pinpoint several issues that local writers have articulated repeatedly while living in today’s Kharkiv.

Though several other places in east Ukraine are currently home to some very interesting literary efforts, Kharkiv arguably accommodates the most vibrant literary scene in this part of the country. This scene has not yet been explored in today’s scholarship.¹²⁹ Leaving the study of the territorial bordering processes—as well as of the political and social structures of a border—to political geographers and social scientists, this book approaches Kharkiv’s literature as a fruitful field for examining the notions of boundaries in a dynamic borderland city’s fiction. It continues with a closer examination of historical and cultural forces that shape Kharkiv today; situates them within the context of present-day memory studies; and proceeds to propose an analysis of the city’s contemporary fiction. As such, this project aims to add the voice of the borderlands to the general field of knowledge about

¹²⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131. A structure of feeling does not have a clear setting: its “peculiar location . . . is the endless comparison that must occur in the process of consciousness between the articulated and the lived” (Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* [New York: Schocken Books, 1979], 168).

¹²⁹ An interesting consideration in this context is the degree to which Kharkiv’s location matters in its fiction. I submit that local writers are cartographers, spatial thinkers, whose narratives are frequently geopolitical in nature. Zhadan’s texts rely heavily on their geographical setting, for instance, unlike Andreï Kurkov’s texts, where Kyiv is not granted any significant part. Kurkov, too, is interested in the absurd and the playful, but he does not pointedly “place” his stories. Their specificity of location is low, almost supranational. In *Piknik na l’du* (1997), out of forty-some references to “street” (which in Russian also means the outside in general), over twenty are used to describe the weather; another dozen refer to sounds, like car engines or gunshots. This could be happening anywhere. In contrast, in a book Zhadan published when this project was near completion, *Mesopotamiia* (2014), the author undertakes to answer Pavlo Tychyna’s question: “Kharkiv, Kharkiv, where is your face?” by suggesting that a better formulation would be “Where are your faces?” To reveal these, he sets his collection of stories in a clearly defined, specific area “between Pushkins’ka and Shevchenko streets” (“Spovid’ vil’noi liudyny,” *Glavnoe*, November 4, 2013, <http://glavnoe.ua/articles/a8404>).

the post-Soviet world, where the latest tendencies gravitate toward reiterating and clarifying the effects of trauma—not infrequently at the expense of disavowing the fundamental grey zones of the human experience.¹³⁰



To summarize, the literature examined here foregrounds a consistent ambiguity of margins and unusual overlaps between seemingly different (or even opposite) concepts. This disorientation is usually presented in a plot built around a particular character's unreliable recollections. Coping with such ontological instability, and everything it has come to represent in the Soviet context, may be one of the most important processes happening today in the post-Soviet space. By foregrounding this theme in their novels and short stories, writers arguably appropriate a semiotic condition that could otherwise become overpowering, while adding the potency of these issues to their literary creations. Of interest in this context is Yuri Lotman's theory that border areas enhance semiotic processes.¹³¹

As mentioned earlier, the focus is on the younger, doubletake generation: those whose formative years coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. They processed this experience when they were old enough to remember the former regime, yet young enough to grow into the new one.¹³² Such semiwitnessing is the reason Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory does not apply to this cohort—postmemory implies a relationship to events that preceded one's birth.¹³³ At the start of this research project, the writers under study were under

¹³⁰ See chapter 2 for a discussion of how Zhadan's novel *Voroshyllovhrad* (2010) successfully recalibrates such "complete severance" paradigms of separation from a traumatic past.

¹³¹ Yuri Lotman, *Stat'i po semiotike i topologii kul'tury* (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1992), 15.

¹³² For a brief overview of the previous generation of writers, see Vitaly Chernetsky, "Ukrainian Literature at the End of the Millennium: The Ten Best Works of the 1990s," *World Literature Today* 76 (2002): 98–101.

¹³³ Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29 (2008): 107.

forty years old. Their navigation of the past and the present, as reflected in their writing, is what I have set out to plot.¹³⁴

Before proceeding, it is important to note that not all Kharkiv literature is about memory, blurred boundaries, and in-betweenness. The novels and stories discussed in this book are approached through the chosen disciplinary lenses without any intent to imply that other themes cannot be found in them and fruitfully analyzed. However, memory positioned as personal, and the interrogation of borders, are among the main recurrent topics in this body of fiction. As such, they warrant our attention.

Jameson's exploration of space in the postmodern condition can be fruitfully complemented by a closer consideration of the aesthetics of placing a subject in time in a post-traumatic setting. The spatial turn in contemporary scholarship, though certainly significant, is nevertheless incomplete when it comes to reflecting the nuances of the post-Soviet era. When the USSR ceased to exist, for instance, a temporal notion—that of the end of history—played an important role in academic discussions.¹³⁵ The art of providing the protagonist with a grid for spatial positioning is not what the literature under study aims to achieve. Instead, it searches for strategies of navigating numerous zones of indistinction, including temporal ones. In doing so, it exhibits certain modes of voyaging, which the following chapters explore in greater detail.

¹³⁴ Such memory-related currents, of course, are but one of the reasons authors transform imagination into the written word. Another reason could be to entertain, or simply to make a living selling books. Not all imaginative literature written today in recently traumatized parts of the world is fiction that reflects the legacy struggle. Nevertheless, a very interesting portion of it is, indeed, legacy fiction.

¹³⁵ This notion originates with Karl Marx and refers to his belief that the inevitable victory of communism will end history as we know it, with wars and revolutions. The idea was reversed in a 1992 bestseller by Francis Fukuyama, who interpreted the collapse of the USSR as signaling the completion of humanity's ideological evolution toward capitalism and universalized Western culture (Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* [New York: Free Press, 1992]). The title of Fukuyama's original essay, published in 1989, included a question mark: "The End of History?"—which was dropped in the book's title.

Picking up the sociocultural themes raised in this introduction, chapter 1 examines Ukraine as an object of knowledge, both academic and public. Chapter 2 discusses the fundamental, grounding role assigned to memory in doubletake fiction, with memory positioned as both a compass and a counterweight to emptiness. This is followed in chapter 3 by an investigation of the role of spiritual helpers, the psychopomps, which emerge in order to guide the characters through the hazy frontiers of life and death. Chapter 4 interrogates excessive textual zooming-in on suffering, deprived of any comprehensible background, as a method of communicating the postmodern thesaurus of the macabre. Chapter 5 analyzes a selection of monologues of madness, which create vortices of consciousness in an attempt to communicate confessional recollections and visions of death, while foregrounding heightened mobility in response to unsteady surroundings.

A close look at memory on the frontiers (and at the frontiers of memory, in terms of cultures and narratives coming together) in Kharkiv's contemporary fiction can reveal what is remembered on today's east Ukrainian border, who remembers it, and, quite important, how—both in terms of qualities attributed to these memories and of the textual forms used to convey them. The central presumption here is not that fiction is simply employed to feed history. Rather, it is that the imagined (but not imaginary) space of fiction, born in a single city in a span of twenty-some turbulent years after the Soviet Union's dissolution, can be treated as an extraterritorial region of its own, with a particular "structure of feeling."

Krasniashchikh has described Kharkiv as an imaginative creation, a literary game (*literaturnaia igra*) that has grown to be more than mere play.¹³⁶ And as Zhadan maintains, it has a literature of its own, held together by the city itself:

Literature is like memory: the farther you move away [from Kharkiv], the more distorted it becomes. One day someone should really try to collect these texts, assemble them into some sort of order, and construct one comprehensive text out of them—a unified set of symbols, whose random combination

¹³⁶ Beliaev and Krasniashchikh, *Khar'kov v zerkale*, 14.

generated this new literature. These authors wouldn't gather as a group anywhere else, because literature has long ceased to be held together by performances, journals, or almanacs. The only thing that can connect writers today is, say, architecture, façades of old buildings, words written on walls, . . . broken glass under their feet and old names of city streets . . . all this *litter*. Literature emerges when you internalize it all.¹³⁷

By examining the perceptions and representations depicted in Kharkiv's fiction, as positioned at the intersection of memory and literature, I hope to respond to this Kharkivite's call to action. In doing so, this book seeks to contribute to an ongoing exploration of strategies contemporary Ukrainian writers employ to construct and reconstruct cultural and historical discourses, while representing the collective consciousness in all its contradictions and complexities.

¹³⁷ Zhadan, "Vykhid," in *Potiah*, 41.

Chapter One

FRONTIERS OF IDENTITY*

One should probably be suspicious of the notion of identity, but even more, of keeping silent about it.

—Édouard Glissant (2007)

All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past.

—Jorge Luis Borges (1945)

In Ukrainian studies of recent years, the formula of Two Ukraines—a conceptualization of the country as a synthetic and flammable combination of two predetermined conflicting entities—has arguably become a universal explanatory mechanism with “a near-absolute discursive power.”¹ This proclaimed battle between the “pro-European West” and the “pro-Russian East” has provided a convenient binary interpretative framework, rendering a complex country temptingly simple: its internal dynamics could now be attributed to a skirmish between

* An earlier version of this chapter was published as Tanya Zaharchenko, “Polyphonic Dichotomies: Memory and Identity in Today’s Ukraine,” *Demokratyzatsiia: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 21 (2013): 241–69.

¹ Andreï Portnov, *Uprazhneniia s istoriei po-ukrainski* (Moscow: Memorial, 2010), 69.

its good and bad halves.² And despite pleas for mutual understanding, this alienating approach continues to seduce minds and secure loyalties on both sides of the chimerical frontier between the alleged two Ukraines.

In the 1990s, Samuel Huntington explicitly identified Ukraine as a cleft country where East and West clash around an internal “civilizational fault line.”³ With time, this framework became enveloped in normative formulas that attribute a set of moral qualities to each side and, as a result, argue for the superiority of one over the other. This problematic delineation has been termed the Huntingtonization of the Ukrainian political discourse.⁴ The main beneficiaries of such Huntingtonization are political actors on both ends of the spectrum, who can use it to achieve their own goals. Electoral support, for instance, can be secured through the vague but persistent feeling of endangerment evoked by those represented as the Other.

The prevalence of static, bifurcated interpretations of Ukrainian national identity has, at times, affected the thinking of intellectuals like Yuri Andrukhovych in less than encouraging ways—as evidenced, for instance, by his 2011 suggestion that in twenty years the country will cease to exist.⁵ In another example of this approach, Mykola Riabchuk, a prolific analyst and one of the authors of the Two Ukraines theory, stated that the failure to develop an overarching civic national identity may result in an “Ulster-style conflict between aboriginal ‘nationalists’ and settler ‘unionists.’”⁶ Reducing the country to an antagonism of neatly defined aboriginals and settlers is, of course, not only inherently alienating, but also generally inac-

² E.g., Klaus Bachmann, “Pierwszy krok na nieprzetartym szlaku,” *Rzeczpospolita*, December 4, 2004, <http://archiwum.rp.pl/artykul/518003-Pierwszy-krok-na-nieprzetartym-szlaku.html>.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 165.

⁴ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “The Myth of Two Ukraines,” *Eurozine*, September 17, 2002, <http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2002-09-17-zhurzhenko-en.pdf>.

⁵ Yuri Andrukhovych, “Ukrainy cherez 20 rokiv ne bude,” *Polit.ua*, April 5, 2011, <http://www.polit.ua/articles/2011/04/05/andruhovych.html>.

⁶ Mykola Riabchuk, “Ukrainian Identity and East Slavonic ‘Ummah’: Uneasy Emancipation,” lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge, December 9, 2011.

curate—both nation-oriented and neighbor-oriented cultural currents have appeared in all parts of Ukraine over the past centuries. Referring to the provocative effects of such statements, historian Andreï Portnov warns: “The one-dimensional image of a Stalinist Zaporizhia and a fascist Lviv is *as of yet* far from reality.”⁷ In fact, as the present chapter argues, the so-called identity crisis in Ukraine is a short-sighted (and politically profitable) label attached to the distinctive pluralism that mediates the situation in the bilingual country—both before and since the war in east Ukraine began.

Interrogating the notion of proper or improper Ukrainians in favor of a nuanced, historicized, and localized approach, this chapter examines some of the country’s many self-identifications and positions them within the framework of memory studies. It contends that memory theory holds some important keys to understanding cultural and political processes in Ukraine today. The third and final part of the discussion focuses on the nation’s second-largest metropolis, Kharkiv, as a curious case of a largely (but not exclusively) Russophone gateway city that maintains an inclusive Ukrainian identity.

Kharkiv is one of many places that fit neither the east nor the west ideational confines. The goal of the proposed analyses is to take another step towards understanding some of the social processes taking place in what may well be one of the most intriguing yet least comprehended countries in the post-Soviet space, particularly as far as Ukraine’s eastern part is concerned. This chapter lays down the historical and societal background for the literary analysis in the subsequent chapters.

Fluid identities

From its very beginnings, eastern and western traits entangled within Ukraine in peculiar ways. As Ivan Rudnytsky pointed out, the Kievan State “combined a predominantly Eastern, Greek, Byzantine religious and cultural tradition with a predominantly Western social and

⁷ Andreï Portnov, “L’vovskaia provokatsiia na 9 maia, ili Shutki v storonu,” *Uroki istorii. XX vek*, May 10, 2011, <http://urokiistorii.ru/blogs/andrei-portnov/1560> (italics in the original).

political structure.”⁸ He called Ukraine a legitimate member of both east and west. Indeed, a number of works have addressed the intersection of these two concepts, as we understand them today, within the country.⁹ During the Golden Age of Kyiv, the lands of Rus’ covered modern western, central, and northern Ukraine, as well as Belarus and western Russia. But Rus’ did not include today’s eastern and southern Ukraine: these lands were inhabited by nomads. So throughout the centuries, different areas of the country accumulated different historical legacies as parts of the Polish-Lithuanian, Habsburg, Ottoman, Tsarist, and Soviet territories. As a result of cultural memory rooted in these varying experiences, Ukraine today is peppered with diverse patterns of ethnic, linguistic, and religious traits.

In an effort to tackle the situation and designate the “real” Ukraine in this polyphony, both academic and popular discussions in the past have focused on the implicit significance of ethnicity and language as signs of national identity. But in a country where different regions have been subject to differing external forces, and thus bear historically diverse collective memories, this approach sets up a pre-ordained win-lose dichotomy, resulting in the classification of some nationals as more Ukrainian—if not as better Ukrainians—than others. From such sentiments emerged the formula of Two Ukraines—a thesis that assigns pro-Russian traits to one part of the country, pro-European traits to another part, and then sets these two imaginary entities up in a combative dichotomy.¹⁰ This approach conveniently reduced

⁸ Ivan L. Rudnytsky, “Ukraine between East and West,” in *Essays in Modern Ukrainian History*, ed. Peter L. Rudnytsky (Edmonton: CIUS, 1987), 8.

⁹ See, e.g., Ihor Ševčenko, “Ukraine between East and West,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 16 (1992): 174–83; Stephen White, Ian McAllister, and Valentina Feklyunina, “Belarus, Ukraine and Russia: East or West?” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (1369–1481) 12 (2010): 344–67; Chrystia Freeland, Stefan Wagstyl, and Tom Warner, “East or West: Ukraine’s Election Could Alter Relations with Russia and Europe,” *Financial Times*, October 12, 2004, 17; Sven Holdar, “Torn between East and West: The Regional Factor in Ukrainian Politics,” *Post-Soviet Geography* 36 (1995): 112–32.

¹⁰ Two years after the first version of this chapter was completed, the events of the Maidan movement received similar interpretations in much of the press coverage. Rather than surveying these demonstrations as a gathering of diverse Ukrainian citizens of all backgrounds in support of the shared cause of transparent governance, the media often positioned the Maidan as two parts of

the repertoire of people's motivations for political choices and identifications to a simplified scheme, rendering exclusive ideas about the norm and about deviations from that norm. Essentially, one of the main implications of the myth of Two Ukraines is that only one "real" Ukraine can exist.

To challenge this questionable claim, scholars have explored applications of the notion of regionalism to Ukraine. Peter Rodgers argues that "while academic debate has focused on the assumed importance of ethnicity and language as markers of identity, such attention may have been misplaced." He asserts that in Ukraine, one's place of residence—home region—is the real determinant of national identity, "crosscutting, rather than reinforcing," cleavages like ethnicity or language.¹¹ Regrettably, however, the power and popularity of the myth of Two Ukraines regularly hinders most attempts to engage in a study or discussion of regionalism. A number of regional frameworks have been proposed and amended by scholars in the past decades: two, four, five, eight, ten, eleven regions.¹² But the duplex prototype, east and west, preferred mostly by those who focus exclusively on election statistics, seems to retain its original appeal for its supporters.¹³ This is partly due to the fact that its proponents tend to exhibit a "lack of even minimal empathy towards the voting motivations of millions

Ukraine pulling the country into two directions. See, for example, "Press Says Ukraine Torn between EU and Russia," BBC, November 24, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24941697>.

¹¹ Peter W. Rodgers, *Nation, Region and History in Post-Communist Transitions: Identity Politics in Ukraine, 1991–2006* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2008), 34.

¹² Lowell W. Barrington and Erik S. Herron, "One Ukraine or Many? Regionalism in Ukraine and Its Political Consequences," *Nationalities Papers* 32 (2004): 57; Grigory Nemiria, "Regionalism: An Underestimated Dimension of State-Building," in *Ukraine: The Search for a National Identity*, ed. S. L. Wolchik and V. Zviglyanich (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 183–98; Rodgers, *Nation*, 55.

¹³ In engaging with this prototype, I am well aware of the complexities of designating "east" or "west" Ukraine as standardized entities. In fact, I submit that Ukraine neither has nor needs homogeneity. Even within these two invented regions, substantial social, political, and cultural variations can be observed. By consciously adopting the binary language of the myth in question, I hope to undermine it on its own terms.

of their fellow countrymen.”¹⁴ In other words, they reduce regional political choices (such as voting for non-nationalist, leftist parties) to the aboriginal/settler dichotomy explained primarily by the subjects’ mental or moral development.

One example of this position is the pejorative word *bydlo*, derived from the Polish term for cattle (*bydło*). In recent discussions this word has been repurposed to refer to a certain type of east Ukrainian, particularly those hailing from the country’s easternmost mining region, the long-suffering Donbas. The concepts of cultural memory or diverse pasts only superficially enter such commentary, which tends to rely primarily on value judgments. For instance, Riabchuk’s *Paradoxes of Belated Nation-Building* (2000) explicitly links the reasons for said paradoxes in Ukraine to the existence of what he calls “creoles,” or Russophone Ukrainians.¹⁵

At the same time, Paul Pirie has accurately observed that there is “a variety of strategies of ethnic self-identification which do not fit into the simple paradigms of ‘russification’ and assimilation.”¹⁶ The pluralism of self-definitions that permeates the country today has been seen as salvaging by some historians (such as Portnov) and as feckless

¹⁴ Portnov, *Uprazhneniia*, 72. Portnov expands on the topic of electoral preferences in Ukraine in a more recent piece about the Maidan, maintaining that “existent distrust of the government in the East and South of the country does not find a reflection in these regions’ electoral preferences. This is due to the fact these regions, in general, do not view the country’s ‘national-democratic’ political factions as capable of representing them. . . . Indeed, in Ukraine, there is currently no democratic force committed to working consistently with the primarily Russophone electorate in the East and South of the country” (Andreï Portnov, “EuroMaidan: Context and Meanings,” *Euxeimos* 13 [2014]: 10).

¹⁵ Mykola Riabchuk, *Vid Malorosii do Ukrainy: paradoksy zapizniloho natsiєtvorennia* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2000).

¹⁶ Paul S. Pirie, “National Identity and Politics in Southern and Eastern Ukraine,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48 (1996): 1079. Pirie proposes four differing routes to self-identification: strong identification with one group, strong identification with two or more groups, marginal identification with two or more groups (e.g., cosmopolitanism), and, finally, pan-ethnic identification with an entity that encompasses several groups at once (e.g., Canadian). Situational identity, which depends on circumstances at any given moment, also finds its way into this research.

by others (such as Riabchuk). To further our understanding of the situation, let us examine some facts and numbers.

Together, self-described Ukrainians and Russians account for over 95 percent of the country's population. More than two decades ago, according to the 1989 census, 72 percent saw themselves as Ukrainian, and 22 percent as Russian. If we fast-forward to the beginning of the current century, the 2001 census tells us that Ukrainians now comprised 77.8 percent of the population (37.7 million people), and Russians 17.3 percent (8.3 million).¹⁷ Today, in response to the war, these numbers are likely to have shifted again.

In light of the fact that migration of ethnic Russians back to Russia was fairly insignificant between the two censuses, three million people seemingly vanished between 1989 and 2001.¹⁸ Or, as Rodgers points out in his analysis of these numbers, by 2001 they came to define themselves as Ukrainian. He sees this as “evidence of the fluidity of identities in Ukraine and the difficulties encompassed when forcing individuals to choose between two separate categories of ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Russian’ in a national census.”¹⁹ In reality, these categories can be blurred, and the line that separates them comes in varying degrees of clarity. Despite some regional differences, a neatly split country does not exist.

Open, blurred, fluid, shifting, multiple, ambivalent, weak, mixed, dual, situational—these adjectives have been used by scholars to depict the characteristics of national identities in Ukraine. They apply in particular to east Ukraine, where such self-understandings are most common: “heavily concentrated in the urban areas of south-eastern Ukraine, accounting for 51 percent in the Donbas region and 43 percent in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhia.”²⁰ An important study frequently cited in this context is a 1997 survey with over ten thousand respondents, who identified as 69 percent Ukrai-

¹⁷ The Ministry of Statistics of the USSR, *Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia SSSR po rezul'tatam vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1989* (Moscow: Finansy i statistika, 1991). Compare this to the All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001, State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua>.

¹⁸ Some sources have assessed the Russian return migration from Ukraine to be as high as 800,000 people. Even at the highest estimate, this number would account for about one-quarter of the 3,000,000 census shift.

¹⁹ Rodgers, *Nation*, 35.

²⁰ Pogrebinskii, *Politicheskie nastroyeniia nakanune vyborov*.

nian and 20 percent Russian when asked for clear-cut and definitive replies (with 6 percent listing themselves as “both”). This split the respondents roughly along the lines of the 1989 census, where the division was 73 percent to 22 percent. However, when the survey’s second question offered more nuanced and situational terms, its results were quite different: given a set of gradated options, 56 percent identified as Ukrainian, 11 percent as Russian, and nearly 27 percent as both Ukrainian and Russian. These latter 27 percent included 14.3 percent who felt “equally” Ukrainian and Russian, 7.4 percent who felt “more” Ukrainian and 4.9 percent who felt “more” Russian.²¹ American sociologist Paul Spickard observed in 1989 that many people misperceive identity as “boxes—either one has a given ethnicity or one does not.”²² Building on this observation, Pirie argues that census statistics help to reinforce this erroneous idea by requiring individuals to choose only one nationality.²³

Acknowledging such nuances does not imply an assumption that other people in Ukraine do not have a definite and fairly uniform notion of their national identity. As seen in these statistics, 27 percent of fluid self-definitions covers just over a quarter of all respondents. This share rises sharply towards the east. Holders of fluid identity do not appear to be a majority, though their number is certainly sizeable. Likewise, it would be incorrect to assert that there are no observable differences among Ukraine’s regions. With such a collection of varied pasts over a large area, some divergences are all but unavoidable. The argument here, rather, is that these differences are neither static nor homogenous, as the proponents of Two Ukraines would have it,²⁴ nor do they threaten the nation by default. Polyphonic presences in Ukraine are not inherently divisive until purposefully misused by poli-

²¹ Andrew Wilson, “Elements of a Theory of Ukrainian Ethno-National Identities,” *Nations and Nationalism* 8 (2002): 31–54.

²² Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 371.

²³ Pirie, “National Identity,” 1080.

²⁴ Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, lead singer of the well-known Ukrainian music band Okean Elzy, called such proponents to account in an emotional open letter dedicated to the events of the Maidan: Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, “Zvernennia do molodykh,” December 6, 2013, <http://maidan.org.ua/2013/12/svyatoslav-vakarchuk-zvernennya-do-molodyh>.

ticians—something we have been seeing in abundance since the first version of this chapter was written in 2011. Denis-Constant Martin remarks that identities arise in part from self-identifications and in part from external ascriptions.²⁵ Some recent manipulations of such ascriptions are examined in the next section.

In his study of southern and eastern Ukraine, Pirie argues against the common perception of national identity as neatly compartmentalized, seeking instead a wider recognition of the population's shifting or multiple national identities.²⁶ The Russian-or-Ukrainian paradigm is found to be a “highly debatable” simplification of a multifaceted reality. Pirie's work dismisses the assumption that each person holds a single overarching identity, which stays absolute throughout his or her life. Instead, research demonstrated “the dynamism of processes of self-identification and the possibility that each individual can possess simultaneously several competing identities.”²⁷ This notion did not fall on deaf ears. For instance, a 2010 study of language practices in the city of Kharkiv explicitly notes: “It is assumed that an individual may have mixed or overlapping linguistic identifications, which may or may not coincide with ethnic identification.”²⁸

Other recent studies also contest simplistic conceptualizations of identity in Ukraine, particularly in terms of ethnicity or language. A survey carried out by Andrew Wilson and his colleagues in 1998 among Ukrainian respondents showed that “there was little support for any fixed or exclusivist model of Ukrainian identity,” with only 3.9 percent defining identity by language.²⁹ A close look at the election results in 2000 concluded that the split between those in favor and those against Ukrainian statehood in no way coincided with ethnic

²⁵ Denis-Constant Martin, “The Political Configuration of Identities,” lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge, January 31, 2013. See also his “‘Au près de ma blonde. . .,’” *Revue française de science politique* 62 (2012): 21–43.

²⁶ Pirie, “National Identity,” 1080.

²⁷ Rodgers, *Nation*, 43.

²⁸ Margrethe B. Søvik, “Language Practices and the Language Situation in Kharkiv: Examining the Concept of Legitimate Language in Relation to Identification and Utility,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 201 (2010): 5–28.

²⁹ Wilson, “Elements,” 44.

or linguistic divides.³⁰ Such divides, for instance, fail to explain why large numbers of ethnic Russians voted for Ukrainian independence in December 1991.³¹ Along these lines, an essential study was carried out by Lowell Barrington. He examined the 1998 public opinion surveys about the population's support for independence. His results indicated:

Unlike other former Soviet states but like many countries in the West, the real impediments to unity in Ukraine may be related to where in the country one lives and how one is doing economically rather than who one is ethnically or what language one speaks.³²

To further topple the simplified Ukrainian-Russian ethno-linguistic paradigms that lie at the root of the Two Ukraines approach, scholars connect the prevalence of fluid identities in Ukraine to very low levels of support for Russian nationalist parties (with the exception of Crimea). In the 2002 parliamentary elections, only in Crimea did a party called Russian Bloc gain over 4 percent of the vote; its all-Ukrainian percentage was but 0.73 percent.³³ Ukraine's Russians tend to vote for non-nationalist, left-wing candidates. In this context Pirie points out

An unfortunate tendency to assume the national consciousness and homogeneity of the Russian minority and the Ukrainian majority, and to regard the Russians as something akin to the fifth column in Ukraine. . . . In reality, because of a large number of demographic and historical factors, the national ori-

³⁰ Sarah Birch, *Elections and Democratisation in Ukraine* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

³¹ Nemiria, "Regionalism," in Wolchik and Zviglyanich, *Ukraine*.

³² Lowell W. Barrington, "Region, Language, and Nationality: Rethinking Support in Ukraine for Maintaining Distance from Russia," in *Dilemmas of State-led Nation Building in Ukraine*, ed. Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 133.

³³ Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 216.

entation of individuals officially classified as Russians in different parts of the country is often only tenuously so.³⁴

A Russophone writer from Donetsk, the largest city in Donbas, reiterated this point in April 2014 in Moscow, where she traveled to receive an award for her prose. At the microphone, Elena (Olena) Stiazhkina said: “You cannot kill Ukraine in the south and the east, because killing Ukraine would mean murdering me, a Russian, and others, also Russians.”³⁵

Historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, in fact, observes that the Russians in Ukraine have taken on certain local values and attitudes, which have created clear differences between them and the Russians in Russia.³⁶ Moreover, millions of Russophone Ukrainians (often erroneously merged with ethnic Russians in public and academic debates) form another cohort of multifarious self-perceptions within the country. Addressing the difficulties some of them encounter, *Telekrytyka*, an online publication dedicated to covering the Ukrainian media, in 2011 ran a column that remarked:

Russophone Ukrainian patriots do not feel all too comfortable in their own country, which they love above all. They are alien among those who try to usurp the title of Ukrainian patriots first and foremost on the grounds of national and linguistic characteristics.³⁷

The openness and fluidity of such self-perceptions, indeed, has attracted a series of scholarly attacks. “Ukraine remains an amorphous society with a weak sense of national identity” is the start of one of

³⁴ Pirie, “National Identity,” 1080.

³⁵ “Russkoiazycznaia pisatel’nitsa iz Donetska zaiavila v Moskve: ubit’ Ukrainu nel’zia,” *Argument UA*, April 24, 2014, <http://argumentua.com/novosti/russkoyazychnaya-pisatel'nitsa-iz-donetska-zayavila-v-moskve-ubit-ukrainu-nelzya-video>.

³⁶ Yaroslav Hrytsak, “Ukraïna, 1991–1995: nova politychna natsiia,” *Shhid* 4 (1996): 15.

³⁷ Mariia Kyrylenko, “Rosiis’komovnyï ukraïns’kyï patriot—khto vin?” *Telekrytyka*, November 16, 2011, <http://blogs.telekritika.ua/?id=2637>.

Wilson's abstracts.³⁸ The application of the term "weak" to anything that is not rigid happens to be a common conceptual human error. Many of the world's democratic leaders have felt it on their own skin as they competed with candidates who professed less nuanced (and therefore assumed to be stronger) viewpoints on issues such as national security. Recent presidential elections in the United States are a case in point.³⁹ Scholars who espouse a dismissive approach to the diversity of Ukrainian national identity models include Taras Kuzio, who has argued that identity itself is "largely absent in eastern-southern Ukraine."⁴⁰ Denoting historical regional differences as undesirable, he maintains that they represent merely an incomplete identity in transition.⁴¹ Such points of view have been called into question by the ongoing armed conflict. In a recording of holiday greetings from Ukraine's soldiers in the winter of 2014–15, for instance, many speak Russian as they affirm their commitment to serve and protect their country, straight from a warzone.⁴²

A number of historians, both local and international, have criticized the dogmatic approach. Hrytsak argues that regional differences are normal in a country of this size, and that it is possible to delineate many more Ukraines if one wished to do so.⁴³ Rodgers contends that the "simplistic over-generalizations" of binary schemes wrongly represent nation-building as a homogenizing and assimilatory process, underestimating the potential for the co-existence of multiple identities

³⁸ Wilson, "Elements," 44.

³⁹ Positioning the more nuanced opponent as a softer or weaker candidate is a classic move in the conceptual struggle between complete inflexibility and complete malleability of stance. An example of reasoning typical of this approach: "Obama Not 'Strong on National Security' Because He Opposed War 'When the Entire World Believed' Saddam Had WMD," *Media Matters*, October 7, 2007, <http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/200710070003>.

⁴⁰ Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: State and Nation Building* (London: Routledge, 1998), 162.

⁴¹ Taras Kuzio, "National Identity in Independent Ukraine: An Identity in Transition," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 2 (1996): 582–608.

⁴² "Sviatkovy pryvitannia vid biitsiv ATO," 5 kanal, January 2, 2015, <http://ow.ly/2SO74X>.

⁴³ Yaroslav Hrytsak, "Dvadtsiat' dvi Ukraïny," in *Strasti za natsionalizmom: Istorychni eseï* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2004), 216–28.

in modern societies.⁴⁴ Portnov notes that the divergence of the eastern Ukrainian identity from the expected “norm” in no way makes it non-Ukrainian.⁴⁵ Likewise, Rory Finnin maintains:

Ukrainians from Lviv in the west and Donetsk in the east may differ in view on the character and direction of their country, but so do Americans from Massachusetts and Mississippi. They still profess a belonging—and a desire to belong—to their country.⁴⁶

Yet there remains something strangely tempting about depicting conflict as inherent to a country where, against all rules of grammar, national identity is a plural noun in a state of constant flux.

Speculations contending that the ethnic and linguistic divides across Ukraine fully explain the population’s sociopolitical orientations⁴⁷ fit well with alarmist scenarios of national conflict that will eventually split the country along unrealistically clear lines.⁴⁸ Some commentators have even stated that the nation’s disintegration is inevitable.⁴⁹ But as Barrington observed in 2002, “Ukraine is a country in which ethnic tensions were thought to be a serious *potential* problem, yet where serious ethnic conflict did not develop.”⁵⁰ This remained true even during the highly politicized language-based debates in 2012, when Russian was granted a regional language status in thirteen of the country’s twenty-seven regions (this law has since been

⁴⁴ Rodgers, *Nation*, 52.

⁴⁵ Portnov, *Uprazhneniia*, 74.

⁴⁶ Rory Finnin, “Ukrainians: Expect-the-Unexpected Nation,” *CRASSH* (blog), December 20, 2013, <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/blog/post/ukrainians-expect-the-unexpected-nation>.

⁴⁷ E.g. Dominique Arel and Valeriy Khmelko, “The Russian Factor and Territorial Polarization in Ukraine,” *People, Nations, Identities: The Russian-Ukrainian Encounter (The Harriman Review)* 9 (1996): 81–91; Dominique Arel and Andrew Wilson, “Ukraine under Kuchma: Back to Eurasia?” *RFE/RL Research Report* 3 (1994): 1–12.

⁴⁸ E.g., “Ukraine: The Birth and Possible Death of a Country,” *Economist*, May 7, 1994, 4.

⁴⁹ E.g., Robert Seely, “Ukraine’s Identity Crisis,” *Moscow Times*, June 7, 1994.

⁵⁰ Barrington and Herron, “One Ukraine or Many,” 59 (*italics in the original*).

repealed).⁵¹ The Maidan, too, attracted a wide spectrum of participants; about a quarter of them identified Russian as the main language they use at home.⁵² These demonstrations have been described as a coexistence of individuals from considerably dissimilar social circles. The rigid binary framework fails to account for this distinctive reality. The Russo-Ukrainian war is not language- or ethnicity-based, either. It involves troops, annexation of land and information warfare, and it did not commence until deliberate political maneuvering fired it up.

One of the unfortunate results of the flawed Two Ukraines approach is the perpetual conceptual fog it casts over the country's eastern lands. In fact, the myth's discriminatory potential is among its most ingrained traits. According to Volodymyr Kulyk, it builds a simplistic image of the Other from Russian-speaking Ukrainians, overlooking a whole set of existing divisions in Ukrainian society.⁵³ A convenient blame framework is part of the myth's benefits:

The politically profitable thesis of the Two Ukraines . . . has absorbed a discriminatory potential towards a part of the country's population. [This potential is] rooted in the intellectual publications of the mid-1990s, when it was a reaction to the failure of the "Ukrainianization" project and a wish to reassign all responsibility for this failure.⁵⁴

Another scholar who has consistently questioned representations of eastern Ukrainian identities as weak and essentially premodern, Zhurzhenko, similarly concludes that the Two Ukraines discourse is often used for a particular goal: that of scapegoating one part of Ukraine for any difficulties in the nation-building processes in the past decades.

⁵¹ Zhadan described the cause of this conflict as "a couple of imbeciles appearing and announcing that our biggest problem is language" ("Sergei Zhadan o natsionalizme, oligarkhakh i nenormativnoi leksike," *Polemika*, April 11, 2011, <http://polemika.com.ua/article-64186.html>).

⁵² "Maïdan-dekabr' i Maïdan-fevral': chto izmenilos'?" Kievskii mezhdunarodnyi institut sotsiologii, February 6, 2014, <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=226>.

⁵³ Volodymyr Kulyk, "Shchyri ukraïntsi ta ikhniï 'othering,'" *Krytyka* 12 (2000): 28–31.

⁵⁴ Portnov, *Uprazhneniia*, 71.

The more problematic the perspectives of democratic reforms and nation-building become, the more the regional differences between the “two Ukraines” are turned into differences between two civilizations in the Huntingtonian sense.⁵⁵

Like Portnov, Zhurzhenko argues that this myth was concocted to offer a plausible explanation for why the national idea of 1991 has failed, and who can be held responsible. Referring to Kuzio as representative of such thinking, she challenges his depiction of Ukraine as a mechanical combination of Estonia and Belarus, which suggests that, were it not for its eastern lands, the country would have joined the European Union by now.⁵⁶ This position serves yet another purpose: to elucidate which of the so-called Ukraines deserves more support from the global West, because “in our times national myths have to be sellable not only on the domestic market.”⁵⁷

So from a variety of factors—like the need to explain certain national failures or the wish to appeal to international opinion—a sellable myth has emerged. It has divided the country into a proper real Ukraine and a second, wrong kind of Ukraine, which must be cleansed of its historical baggage and converted into a purer nation. Rejecting this view of regional differences as a haphazard phenomenon to be corrected, and of nation-building as a homogenizing and assimilatory process, Barrington, Pirie, Portnov, Rodgers, and Zhurzhenko, among others, have claimed that multiculturalism and fluid identities do not form a pitfall by default. Instead, these traits are an asset that should have its own place in the national arena:

The challenge facing the Ukrainian society and elites nowadays is how to perceive regional diversity not in confrontational and mutually exclusive terms, but as a wealth of differences; how to recognize “the other” not as a threat, but as an opportunity.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Zhurzhenko, “Myth.”

⁵⁶ Taras Kuzio, lecture delivered at the University of Toronto, April 8, 2002.

⁵⁷ Zhurzhenko, “Myth.”

⁵⁸ Portnov, *Uprazhneniia*, 103.

East and west Ukraine, of course, are not the only areas of the country in existence. A vast land lies between them, sometimes known in academia as “the Other Ukraine.”⁵⁹ All of its regions, as well as both of the artificially branded Two Ukraines, share an important trait: the innate human need to have their respective, differing stories heard, acknowledged, and accepted. But due to the mutually exclusive positioning of some of these stories, hearing and acknowledging alternative narratives has been anything but easy.

Narratives at war

In the hierarchy of regions established within the new, post-Soviet political geography, some are frequently presented as more advanced than others in terms of cultural and political inclinations. In Ukraine’s commonly misapprehended eastern lands, in particular, mixed remembrance trajectories have formed fluid identities often questioned by observers. These observers include both external and internal critics, the latter being perhaps more vicious in their evaluation of the perils of multiculturalism.⁶⁰ This section examines the nature of such self-definitions, and the way they have been handled in contemporary scholarship. By doing so, one can begin to replace the outdated binary formula of identities with a more complex, more realistic and, naturally, more gradated one.

As a result of the binary thinking this chapter has set out to query, east Ukraine was relatively marginalized on the symbolic map of the country, as redrawn after 1991. This advanced-backward dichotomy is built on yet another opposition, that of Ukrainian-Russian and Ukrainian-European integration as mutually exclusive alternatives. Some

⁵⁹ This topic deserves coverage of its own. For instance, it has been argued that “the existence of the ‘Other Ukraine’ is what makes polarization of Ukrainian society difficult.” See Andrew Wilson, “The Political System,” in *Ukraine: Challenges of the Continuing Transition* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 1999), <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS19577>.

⁶⁰ David Ley notes that “The most damaging opposition to multiculturalism has been populist rather than intellectual, and has frequently been associated with the international rise of nativist parties on the right” (Ley, “Post-multiculturalism?” in *Immigration*, 181).

Ukrainian intellectuals present the delineation between east and west Ukraine as the boundary between the nation's bright future and its past. Indeed, the currently prevailing paradigm of Ukrainian geopolitics assumes that the country moves along a rudimentary scale between Europe and Russia, so the less Russian it is, the more European it automatically becomes.

By setting up a fallaciously exclusive choice, this conceptual opposition contributes to the country's polarization. It essentially constitutes a moral delineation based on the ethno-linguistic principle.⁶¹ A writer from Ivano-Frankivsk asserted in 2014: "Entirely different people live in [Ukraine's] far east; people whom we westerners can neither comprehend nor accept, and certainly not consider our own."⁶² As commentators have pointed out, different in this context stands for worse. This attachment of value judgments to locales, languages, and ethnicities is one of the most unfortunate consequences of existing Ukrainian dichotomies. In 1995, *The Economist* characteristically went so far as to dub the country's variegation "schizophrenia."⁶³ Some academics still uphold this diagnosis today.

But as Finnin points out, "Heterogeneity and contestation are not necessarily a sign of weakness, nor are homogeneity and consensus always a sign of strength."⁶⁴ Rather than being inexplicably "schizophrenic," the diversity of Ukrainian self-ascriptions is rooted, at least partly, in a case of narratives being at war with each other. As discussed, different parts of the country espouse historically diverse collective memories. World War II, for instance, at times pitted west and east Ukrainians against each other. Not a single narrative of those traumatic events remains unchallenged today.

When one's sense of one's past and one's losses is denied its share of authenticity, it is fairly natural to become defensive. It is thus important for the contemporary scholar of postsocialism to be able to examine

⁶¹ Portnov, *Uprazhneniia*, 73. Examples of such delineation can be seen when attraction to democracy and civic society is ascribed only to Ukrainophone persons. See, e.g., Riabchuk, "Civil Society and Nation Building."

⁶² Taras Prokhas'ko, "Dalekoskhidnyi ukrains'kyi front," *Galyts'kyi Korespondent*, April 23, 2014, <http://www.gk-press.if.ua/node/11885>.

⁶³ "Post-Soviet Schizophrenia," *Economist*, February 4, 1995, 27.

⁶⁴ Finnin, "Ukrainians."

and question history without refuting the legitimacy of the respective human experience itself. This may be what Serhiy Zhadan referred to when he pleaded:

We need to accept the simple idea that we're all different. Though we live in one country, we differ from one another. There are objective reasons for this—history, above all. Here, for instance, Soviet rule arrived in 1917; in Galicia it happened only in 1939. Ignoring this fact will lead us nowhere.⁶⁵

Recall Ricoeur and St Augustine's "the present of the past."⁶⁶ The current state of the past is what breeds the shadows we have been seeing in Ukraine. Collective storylines, both verbalized and internal, tend to grow perilously sharp edges in the aftermath of trauma and turmoil—such as collapse of an empire, violent protests, or war.

According to some scholars, when the layer of collective memory is cracked—for instance, by an incomplete or failed recovery from extensive sociopolitical distress—a vacillating trauma can emerge. Inhabitants of the resulting cultural space are often unable to transcend the primitive "framework of knowledge functionalized as bonding memory."⁶⁷ For example, they may spend much energy attacking or defending monuments to various political leaders (such as Bandera or Lenin) because these monuments turn into symbols of how the given group views its past, and this joint effort unites people of otherwise different backgrounds. The application of memory theory to Slavonic studies classifies the current times as a postrevolutionary era—a continuing attempt at recovery from a state of permanent revolution that started in 1917.⁶⁸ The Soviet Union's vague finale, which contrasts with the Nazi regime's complete capitulation in 1945, has

⁶⁵ Serhiy Zhadan, "Ukraine: An Interview," trans. Tanya Zaharchenko, *Of Memory and Identity* (blog), July 10, 2012, <http://memoryidentity.wordpress.com/2012/07/10/ukraine-interview>.

⁶⁶ Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 31.

⁶⁷ Assman, "What Is 'Cultural Memory'?" 21.

⁶⁸ Alexander Etkind, "Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany," *Grey Room* 16 (2004): 41.

complicated the crucial work of mourning in the newly independent states.

This may be why some sections of Ukrainian society are at odds today—not due to language, or ethnicity, or religion, as much as to a heightened focus on conflicting and competing interpretations of history, where acceptance of the other version(s) automatically seems to endanger one's own. These narratives' current functionalization as bonding memory exerts its toll on Ukrainian citizens and their loyalties—a situation masterfully manipulated by several sides of the Maidan confrontation, as well as by the government of the Russian Federation. But when viewed through the prism of memory studies, which affords recognition to individual and collective experiences of historical events, most of these interpretations gain a right to exist. Unlike the identity boxes Spickard had contested, they do not automatically cancel each other out.⁶⁹

Let us take a closer look at what is generically termed western Ukraine—a geographically valid but politically superficial concept that fails to differentiate between the different histories of the regions it claims to cover.⁷⁰ For historical reasons, nationalism budded here long before the Soviet era. It ripened under the Austrian rule, inspired not least by the population's confrontations with Polish authorities. "Popular frustration over national discrimination and assimilation attempts by Polish and Romanian authorities resulted in the rise there of a Ukrainian radical right," maintains historian Serhy Yekelchuk.⁷¹ The west Ukrainians' struggle for their strong sense of national belonging continued under Soviet rule. Most of the country's western

⁶⁹ In a fascinating literary allusion, Zhadan's *Voroshyllovhrad* features a surreal fable about children who cannot decide which of their two empty houses to bury; instead, they bury a living animal. In my analysis of this scene, proposing that the houses represent identities, I contend: the grave mistake is the assumption that accepting a narrative means discarding (burying) its alternatives, and that establishing a national identity is a zero-sum game. This binary scheme overlooks the historically conditioned pluralism embedded in today's Ukrainian society. See chapter 2.

⁷⁰ For more on this, see Barrington and Herron, "One Ukraine or Many."

⁷¹ Serhy Yekelchuk, "Western Ukrainian Lands between the Wars: The Birth of Radical Nationalism," in *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 134.

territories were incorporated into the Soviet Union only in the late 1930s. Now the national narratives of World War II are split over the actions of Ukrainian nationalist fighters, whose efforts were concentrated primarily in the west. They are still honored as freedom heroes by some and condemned as Nazi collaborators by others. Recall here direct repressions after the war, and the preparedness of residents of western Ukraine to externalize the fairly brief and traumatic communist experience appears hardly surprising.⁷²

An important point in this context is that people in the west, like people in the east, are misrepresented by the Two Ukraines framework. Its discriminatory potential, like most sentiments rooted in intolerance, goes both ways. Similar accusations of not being properly Ukrainian, this time due to corruptive effects of Poland or the West, have been directed at the country's western lands. Such allusions cite, for example, Galicia's history under foreign powers—particularly the influences of the Polish and Habsburg cultures—or its cooperation with the Nazi regime during World War II. A case in point is the notorious statement by Dmytro Tabachnyk, Minister of Education and Science between 2010 and 2014, who publicly claimed in 2009 that residents of Galicia have nothing in common with the rest of Ukraine.⁷³ Given the long history of the national struggle in this part of the country, such callous words are tinted by past experience, fitting perfectly into the principal narrative of oppression and resistance that bonds the carriers of collective memory here. A tagline to a recent documentary film pinpointed this continuum by referring to Galicia as “a land where the Second World War never ended and where children grow up with the burden of fighting the battles of their grandparents.”⁷⁴

⁷² Fueled by “abandonment of wartime reliance on non-Russian patriotism as a mobilization tool,” these repressions stemmed from the Kremlin’s “growing concern with the strength of Ukrainian nationalism, especially in the western regions” (Yekelchuk, “Nazi Occupation and the Soviet Victory,” in *Ukraine*, 146).

⁷³ Dmytro Tabachnyk, “Shansy Ukraïny na vyzhyvannia,” October 8, 2009, <http://tsn.ua/ukrayina/tabachnik-shansi-ukrayini-na-vizhivannya-porivnyanni-z-polshcheyu-1939-roku.html>.

⁷⁴ From the tagline to *Three Stories of Galicia* (2011).

The media readily exploit this divisive discourse as well: some observers note that President Yanukovych maintained his support in the rest of Ukraine in part by painting the west as ultra-nationalist. It has been suggested that his party might be covertly funding radical right-wing organizations for this very reason.⁷⁵ According to such discourse, it is not the east but the west that is alien to the rest of the country. This is a reverse carbon copy of the same divisive paradigm.⁷⁶

Intricate and often tragic events stand behind, and legitimate, many of the narratives embraced by the western population of Ukraine. Likewise, the viewpoint of those who hail from the east warrants its own sense of acknowledgement and validity—a sense sought by, and frequently denied to, the easterners over recent decades. Scholars researching this issue have pointed out that unlike the western borders, “the Ukrainian-Russian border was never a zone of open confrontation, ethno-national conflict, separate memory, and especially ethnic cleansing”⁷⁷ (sadly, 2014 altered this situation). The area therefore generated a different set of local narratives. Some of them have found their way into literature.

Research in east Ukraine shows that people are often “very keen to stress that eastern Ukrainians should not be ‘blamed’ for failing to reject any associations with all things Russian.”⁷⁸ Instead, they seek recognition of their particular place within the country, along with this position’s geography, its baggage, and its resulting sense of self. A common notion of the past in these lands is rooted in “a shared Soviet history, with its hopes, failures, horrors and crimes, where Ukrainians were not just victims of an imposed external power but also active

⁷⁵ “Sergei Zhadan o natsionalizme.”

⁷⁶ International actors are also responsible, to a degree, for continued depictions of the non-overlapping duality of identity in Ukraine. Such forces may include a certain fraction of the Ukrainian diaspora concerned with sustaining a manageable narrative of enemies versus friends, or the Russian authorities’ interest in maintaining influence in Ukraine in part by depicting some of the country’s citizens as exclusively Russian. The clash of Russian and EU interests in the region during and after the Maidan is a vast topic of its own.

⁷⁷ Kravchenko, *Kharkov/Kharkiv*, 7.

⁷⁸ Rodgers, “Understanding Regionalism,” 161–62.

agents of their own history.”⁷⁹ This does not imply an attachment to all things Soviet; rather, it may be seen as a refusal to renounce a chunk of one’s formative experiences just because their political setting was problematic. As Zhadan puts it, “[patriotism means] respect for the place, circumstances, landscapes, and people among whom you were born and who surround you. People often confuse patriotism with love for themselves, for their own ideas, preferences, and illusions.”⁸⁰ Viewpoints such as this one emphasize the inclusive, rather than selective, acceptance of the nuances that come with one’s home region.

In the clash of concepts embodied by the paradigm that attempts to split Ukraine into two parts, the east may be somewhat more difficult to explain or represent. As a region, it is frequently shunned by the dominant trends of thinking, and “considered a ‘proto-nation’ which has to ‘catch-up’ with Western Ukraine.”⁸¹ But what is the story behind this so-called proto-nation? Is it, indeed, an unfortunate fluke that inconveniently encompasses millions of people, or does it have a place among the country’s many experiences? This book adopts the latter position. In attending to the concept of identity, it is helpful to note anthropologist Daniel Yon’s observation that it “unfolds as an odd combination of first- and second-hand memories [and] shifting geographies,”⁸² and to avoid assigning the quality of essence to what is better understood as a construct—albeit one that wields great influence.

A regional version of national identity in the east has developed without complete renunciation of Russian culture, although the area

⁷⁹ Zhurzhenko, “Myth.” Compare to Yekelchik’s discussion of “the diaspora historiography [that] narrated the complex, multifaceted events of the first half of the twentieth century as triumphs and tragedies of the Ukrainian (ethnic) nation. This resulted in . . . the overall interpretation of Stalinism as something imposed on Ukrainians by other nationalities: by the Russians, and, in some more extreme nationalist works, also by the Jews” (Serhy Yekelchik, “Remembering the Stalinist Past: The Great Purge in Russian and Ukrainian Collective Memory,” *Le Banquet*, July 2009, <http://www.revue-lebanquet.com/spip.php?article905>).

⁸⁰ “Prosto liudi, Vypusk 81: Serhiy Zhadan,” *Portal nepolitychnykh novyn NGO Donetsk*, October 22, 2013, <http://youtu.be/rqBbJWri02Q>.

⁸¹ Zhurzhenko, “Myth.”

⁸² Daniel A. Yon, *Elusive Culture: Schooling, Race, and Identity in Global Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 26.

simultaneously produced a multitude of influential intellectuals dedicated to the idea of Ukrainian national revival.⁸³ The region's geopolitical location resulted in the creation of "a material and spiritual culture that absorbed the various dimensions of the national-cultural elements" of both countries.⁸⁴ But speaking Russian has not turned Russophone Ukrainians into Russians. Instead, it gave most of them a particular basis of self-understanding that encompasses a variety of things at once, a uniquely "interstitial position."⁸⁵ Boris Chichibabin (born Polushin, 1923–94), one of Kharkiv's best-known poets, mused about this when he wrote that even though he speaks Russian, Ukraine runs in his blood.⁸⁶ Years earlier, in 1927, the first issue of Kharkiv's literary magazine *Krasnoe slovo*—published by the Russian section of the Vseukraïns'ka Spilka Proletars'kykh Pys'mennykiv (All-Ukrainian Union of Proletarian Writers)—was prefaced as follows: "As the Russian portion of Ukraine's population, we feel deeply our organic unity with this country and its culture."⁸⁷

As Kravchenko points out, the Ukrainian-Russian border generally did not generate symbolic events or places of exclusive memory that would fit into conflicting narratives between the two countries.⁸⁸ His book *Kharkov/Kharkiv: stolitsa Pogranich'ia* (Kharkov/Kharkiv: the Borderland capital, 2010) is among the scholarly texts that explore the position of east Ukrainian cities as frontiers of borderline, flexible identities. Scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s approached the Ukrainian-Russian border as

⁸³ For instance: "The historical narrative of Slobozhanshchyna kept its subversive 'nationalist' potential even in Soviet times, and at the end of the 1980s a significant part of the Kharkiv intelligentsia (especially the humanitarians) was sympathetic to Narodny Ruch and supported the idea of Ukrainian national revival" (Zhurzhenko, "Cross-Border Cooperation, Part 2," 508).

⁸⁴ Volodymyr Kravchenko, "Slavnykh pradidiv velykykh . . .," in *Istoriia Slobids'koï Ukraïny*, by Bahaliï, 6.

⁸⁵ Rory Finnin, "Forgetting Nothing, Forgetting No One: Boris Chichibabin, Viktor Nekipelov, and the Deportation of the Crimean Tatars," *Modern Language Review* 106 (2011), 1102.

⁸⁶ "S Ukraïnoï v krovī ia zhivu na zemle Ukraïny, / i, khot' russkim zovus', potomu chto po-russki pishu . . ." (1975).

⁸⁷ Iuliana Poliakova, "Russkie literaturno-khudozhestvennye zhurnaly Khar'kova XIX–XX veka. Popytka perechisleniia," *Soiuz Pisatelei* 6 (2005), <http://sp-issues.narod.ru/6/polyakova.htm>.

⁸⁸ Kravchenko, *Kharkov/Kharkiv*, 7.

an “ethno-contact” zone, noting its interpenetration of cultures and the neighbors’ mutual perception as “our own other.”⁸⁹ With time this situation is said to have created an atmosphere of “unique ethnic tolerance,” which became an element of “local mentality.”⁹⁰ Cross-border identities that shift between Russian and Ukrainian, or combine both cultural elements, became characteristic of the region.⁹¹ At the same time,

The discourse of “unfinished nation-building” often represents such identities simply as a distorted, degenerated Ukrainian identity, a heritage of the colonial past under foreign dominance. From this standpoint, the shared cultural traditions, beliefs and linguistic similarities in the Ukrainian and Russian borderlands are reduced to mere remnants of the “imperial” past.⁹²

Unsurprisingly, the regions’ different paths through time have led them to different standpoints *in* time. And while people in the west can, in general, successfully follow the Baltic model of excising the communist past, the dissimilar historical experience of the east renders this option unviable. This situation locks the country between two divergent models of one of memory’s most vital elements: working through trauma. What is happening in Ukraine today, then, can be illuminated by memory theory, which examines how people deal with their past, as well as their successes and failures in doing so.

At least some of the problems facing the country at the moment stem from a lack of general understanding of how cultural memory functions. As a result, the reflections of its functions are often misinterpreted as reflections of people themselves, consequently polarizing those whose memory differs, often for reasons beyond their control—such as the geographical location of their experience of history’s events.

⁸⁹ Mykhailo Karasikov, “Slobozhans’ka mental’nist’: mif chy real’nist’?” *Kul’tura ta etno-etika* 3 (1994), 19–20.

⁹⁰ Ol’ga Boldetskaia (Filippova), “Osobennosti pogranichnogo regiona i ikh vliianie na etnonatsional’nuiu identichnost’,” *Regional’nye problemy i perspektivy* 3 (1997): 54.

⁹¹ Liudmila Chizhikova, *Russko-ukrainskoe pogranichi’e: Istorii i sud’by traditsionno-bytovoï kul’tury XIX–XX veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988).

⁹² Zhurzhenko, “Cross-Border Cooperation, Part 2,” 512.

In this context, Portnov's summary of modern Eastern European trends of thinking seems applicable: like their neighbors, many Ukrainians fall prey to

A tendency to blame one's unsightly actions on circumstances, and the unsightly actions of others—on traits of their character (including national characteristics); an inability at least to attempt to understand “the other” and, at the same time, a desperate desire to be understood, heard, and comforted.⁹³

This desperate desire is what most persons have in common, regardless of their language, ethnos, and home region. It is a shared longing that lies at the roots of memory, especially of traumatic memory.

Moving beyond the perception of eastern Ukrainians as a potential object of (re)nationalization is important for the country's future, not least due to the sheer number of people inhabiting its eastern lands. Pirie suggests that since the majority of the population of Ukraine is concentrated there, this region will always hold the key to political power.⁹⁴ These highly urbanized areas, indeed, are the most densely populated. Therefore borderline, local, and regional identities have a substantial role in contemporary Ukraine. An astute observer, Serhii Plokhy, notes that modern Ukrainian society, like rings of a tree's trunk, retains the different types of identities that have emerged in the course of its history.⁹⁵ Creation of a homogenous and all-embracing Ukrainian self, then, might require an excision of some of these rings. How necessary, or even feasible, is this procedure?

In 1991, along with people all over the country, the overwhelming majority of eastern Ukrainians voted in favor of state independence. During the Orange revolution of 2004, the Maidan events of 2013–14, and the subsequent Russo-Ukrainian war, presences from all parts of

⁹³ Andrei Portnov, “O moral'nom i politicheskom smysle pokaianiia,” *Uroki istorii. XX vek*, October 12, 2011, <http://urokiistorii.ru/blogs/andrei-portnov/2456>.

⁹⁴ Pirie, “National Identity,” 1100.

⁹⁵ Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the country were substantial.⁹⁶ The country's identity-related disagreements are not about the supposed regional differences in the people's desire to belong to Ukraine. Rather, the difference lies in *how* the national alternative is visualized around the vast country; what traits are attributed to it as essential by people with different pasts.

In a much-cited definition, Ernest Gellner submits that "nationalism is primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent."⁹⁷ Nationalist sentiment, he reasons, involves feelings aroused by the violation (or the fulfillment) of this principle. Nearly thirty years after Gellner's book first came out, Hrytsak relied on it to argue that Ukraine's "national identity passions" stem from two competing models of envisioning the essence of the national unit. One model is ethnic (hailing from Galicia; can be summarized as the Ukrainian people), another is political (hailing from Donbas; can be summarized as the people of Ukraine).⁹⁸ Though this ethnic-versus-political conception of a nation is an interesting approach, an alternate understanding of nationalism may be more useful in Ukraine's situation.

According to Prasenjit Duara, nationalism refers to "the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other."⁹⁹ Though this observation arose from Duara's work on China,

⁹⁶ When Facebook users began to black out their profile pictures to express mourning for the Maidan's fatalities, I looked in vain for observable quantitative variations between the regions that joined this wave. See also "Mneniia i vzgliady zhitelei iugo-vostoka Ukrainy: aprel' 2014," *Zerkalo nedeli. Ukraina*, April 18, 2014, http://zn.ua/ukraine/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhiteley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598_.html.

⁹⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1.

⁹⁸ Yaroslav Hrytsak, "Khoto taki ukraintsi i choho vony hochut?" in *Strasti za nationalizmom: Stara istoriia na novyi lad* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2011), 326. Even though he views the differences between east and west Ukraine as fundamental in the sense of reflecting two competing models of modernity ("one that considers nations to be *central* to the modern world, and one that does not"), Hrytsak notes that as far as negative values are concerned—such as rigidity and lack of readiness for change—"there is no big difference between, say, East and West of Ukraine or Lviv and Odesa" (335–37, italics in the original).

⁹⁹ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

it reflects Ukraine's current internal dynamics quite accurately. In the country's east, for instance, much of the population pictured the postindependence national alternative "not as a state with a 'titular Ukrainian nation' tolerant towards its national minorities, but rather as a supraethnic community."¹⁰⁰ To understand what stands behind such concepts and where they originate, let us turn to one of the country's eastern regions: Sloboda Ukraine. Its main city, Kharkiv, epitomizes the transboundary character this text has endeavored to formulate and examine.¹⁰¹

Sloboda: Roots of fluidity

Sloboda was a term used for each of the five Cossack military units that, in the seventeenth century, settled the area now known as east Ukraine.¹⁰² The original Sloboda settlers rejected both the state of Bohdan Khmelnytsky and the Polish Commonwealth, defying the two ruling grand narratives of the time. A military fortress, which later became the city of Kharkiv, was built in the mid-1650s.¹⁰³ A series of tsarist patents gave the settlers rights and privileges that distinguished them from the neighboring Russian and Cossack populations. This legal status provided the basis for the formation of a distinct local identity.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

¹⁰¹ "Multiculturalism" is a term with complex theoretical genealogy. It has been much discussed and questioned by political philosophers. For the purposes of this project, I adopt the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy definition, which describes multiculturalism as "taking for granted that all 'culture' and 'cultural groups' are to be recognized and accommodated" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Multiculturalism," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism>).

¹⁰² The territory of historic Sloboda corresponds to the present-day Ukrainian oblast of Kharkiv and parts of the Sumy, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts, as well as parts of the Belgorod, Kursk, and Voronezh oblasts of Russia.

¹⁰³ For a historic overview of Sloboda, see Bahalii, *Istoriia Slobids'koï Ukraïny*.

¹⁰⁴ Kravchenko, "Kharkiv: A Borderland City," 220. In his research on identity politics, Rodgers notes: "An ethnographic study of the Russian-Ukrainian borderlands in the late 1980s found that the population of the region had a culture, local traditions and a mentality, which is difficult to define as either Russian or Ukrainian" (Rodgers, *Nation*, 74).

From its beginnings, the Kharkiv *polk* stretched along the fluid and transparent borders of today's Russia and Ukraine. Together with the semiautonomous Cossack regions of Zaporizhia and Don, Sloboda formed a large frontier zone between the neighboring lands. Later, the Ukrainian-Russian border would be considered an internal one within the Russian Empire, and then within the Soviet Union. It has been described as a mental construct with a symbolic character, which has never quite coincided with the geographic distribution of relevant ethnicities.¹⁰⁵ As an important disclaimer in this context, not all scholars or all inhabitants of the region would agree with this description. The area's heterogeneity includes those who subscribe to the opposite opinion, and would claim that there is nothing symbolic about the national delineation they see as fundamental. This latter attitude intensified in the first half of 2014, as the neighboring country's troops approached the Ukrainian border,¹⁰⁶ and as the events in Crimea unfolded.¹⁰⁷

Following the collapse of the USSR, inhabitants of east Ukraine faced a new international border nearby. Many of those caught in this process have voiced a "sense of frustration that 'their' voice is not being heard, drowned out by 'nationalist' interpretations of Russian-Ukrainian relations" (in other words, by those who call for complete, uncompromising rupture with the Soviet past, symbolized primarily by Russia). Such persons appear disillusioned about the political process in part because they feel it does not represent their views. Individuals have expressed "a dislike at being classified as 'bad' Ukrainians on account of speaking the Russian language. . . . These people feel that they are 'no more and no less' Ukrainian than Ukrainian-speakers from Lviv."¹⁰⁸ Indeed, at the start of the war, east Ukraine (and Kharkiv in

¹⁰⁵ Kravchenko, *Kharkov/Kharkiv*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ "Kharkiv is only a few steps from the border, with Russian troops standing, maneuvering, and waiting for orders on that border," wrote Krasniashchikh in August 2014. Andrei Krasniashchikh, "The Expired Time: View from a Frontline City," trans. Tanya Zaharchenko, *Of Memory and Identity* (blog), August 27, 2014, <http://memoryidentity.wordpress.com/2014/08/27/expired-time>.

¹⁰⁷ The Crimean Peninsula was added to the territories of the Russian Federation in March 2014 after a highly disputed and controversial referendum.

¹⁰⁸ Rodgers, "Understanding Regionalism," 171.

particular) became home to massive volunteering efforts in support of the Ukrainian army. The struggle to be acknowledged as Ukrainians in their own right has become one of the region's continued trials.

It is essential to repeat, however, that just as the west is a concept that homogenizes a diverse population, the east encompasses a variety of positions as well, including within Sloboda itself. Fluid identities account for about half the residents' self-perceptions. The rest vary across the Ukrainian-Russian scale—including both of its far ends, in contrast to what the proponents of the Two Ukraines thesis would have us believe. As Martínez maintains,

In any borderland, the human spectrum ranges from the quint-essential border people (individuals highly immersed in transnational and transcultural interaction) to people who for one reason or another are influenced very little by the presence of the boundary and are therefore not much different from people living in interior areas.¹⁰⁹

An example of a staunchly “Ukrainian” stand in its traditional sense is presented by a Kharkiv university professor who wishes to remain anonymous. He has stated that, in his opinion, the only true Ukraine is represented by Galicia, and therefore all of his efforts “are aimed at turning the rest of the country into Galicia, or at least as close to it as possible.”¹¹⁰ Along somewhat similar lines, Kharkiv poet and scholar Rostyslav Mel’nykiv believes that “language and, consequently, linguistic national identity have always been of particular importance for the proper functioning of . . . geopolitical formations.”¹¹¹ At the same time, his colleague, writer Sashko Ushkalov, also a Ukrainian-speaker, answered when asked about the role of language in establishing one’s nationality: “A Russophone writer born in Ukraine is Ukrainian. There’s no question about it.”¹¹²

Another prominent Kharkivite, Ukrainophone writer and poet Zhadan, protested the doubting of Russian-speaking Ukrainians as

¹⁰⁹ Martínez, *Border People*, xviii.

¹¹⁰ Anonymous, interview by the author, October 13, 2011.

¹¹¹ Rostyslav Mel’nykiv, interview by the author, October 22, 2011.

¹¹² Sashko Ushkalov, interview by the author, January 10, 2011.

real Ukrainians in a piece titled “Opiat’ ob Gogolia.” This was written in support of a Russophone Kharkiv writer and poet Anastasiia Afanasieva, who has been criticized for her native language.¹¹³ The variety and coexistence of all these views in one city demonstrate two things. First, that there is no such thing as a homogenous pro-Russian east. And second, that no “Ulster-style conflict” naturally threatens Ukrainians who hold differing opinions. They tend to maintain mutual respect, despite the efforts of some commentators to pit them against each other. As I have argued, in this setting genuine adversity is likely to appear only as a result of skillful political manipulation.¹¹⁴ When the protagonist and narrator of Zhadan’s *Voroshylovhrad*, Herman Korol’ov, mentions “the borderline radio waves, which broadcast news of two countries at the same time,”¹¹⁵ he is adopting an apt symbol for one of these lands’ arguably fundamental properties of dual attunement.

The country’s “national project,” and those who study its history, cannot afford to ignore places like Kharkiv. So far, true to its foundational beginnings, the city has resisted all attempts to force it into a clear-cut cultural entity under a single grand historical narrative. It can be argued that this position has become a myth-making narrative project of its own.¹¹⁶ Not least due to its purported defiance of monochrome definitions, Sloboda is periodically refused the right to consider itself Ukrainian under the faulty Two Ukraines framework.¹¹⁷ Kravchenko connects this (mis)perception, at least in part, to the foundational beginnings of Sloboda, and particularly of the city of Kharkiv:

¹¹³ Serhiy Zhadan, “Opiat’ ob Gogolia,” <http://afanasieva.wordpress.com/press/zhadan>.

¹¹⁴ Tanya Zaharchenko, “Khar’kovskie motyvy v trëkh variatsiakh. Issledovaniia,” *Historians-in-UA*, April 5, 2012, <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/dyskusiya/210-tania-zakharchenko-kharkovskye-motyvy-v-trekh-varyatsyakh>.

¹¹⁵ Serhiy Zhadan, *Voroshylovhrad* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2010), 244.

¹¹⁶ Consider George Schöpfung’s definition: “Myth is a set of beliefs, usually put forth as a narrative, held by a community about itself.” George Schöpfung and Geoffrey Hosking, eds., *Myths and Nationhood* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 19.

¹¹⁷ For an analysis, see “Partitura dlia ‘dvukh’ Ukrain,” in Portnov, *Uprazhneniia*, 69–103.

From the point of view of the Cossack Hetmanate, Kharkiv represented a permanent threat; it was the center for the concentration of “traitors,” political dissidents and deserters, whose claims to be Cossacks could be doubted. Different Cossack hetmans, starting with Bohdan Khmelnytsky, regardless of their foreign political orientation, aimed to liquidate the Sloboda settlement, or at least put it under their control. Each time, these attempts failed.¹¹⁸

Historian Hiroaki Kuromiya adopts a similar approach in his research on the Donbas region, renowned for its coalmining. Kuromiya maintains that the highly developed underground (both literally and figuratively) world of Donbas became a refuge for freedom seekers of all kinds. The image of the area “continued to maintain some elements of the free steppe” even at the height of Stalinism.¹¹⁹ As in the case of Donbas, some traces of the dissidents-and-deserters image of Sloboda residents have taken root in the country’s narratives. It is not surprising that, as Kravchenko maintains, before the current war this city’s inhabitants tended to distance themselves from most political centers and struggles for power.

In light of this situation, some may note that the city’s largely de-politicized nature yields the result of decreasing its influence on Ukraine’s other regions. Nearby, a politically ascendant Donetsk and a previously powerful Dnipropetrovsk ostensibly continue to feed the stereotype of east Ukraine, while Kharkiv’s strong cultural currents seem to remain beyond down-to-earth politics, and therefore end up overlooked in the stereotype’s formation and sustenance. Places like Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk may, indeed, appear somewhat closer to the clichés this chapter has attempted to tackle, due to their own set of cultural and historical experiences.¹²⁰ But an open-minded visitor can

¹¹⁸ Kravchenko, “Kharkiv: A Borderland City,” 220.

¹¹⁹ Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

¹²⁰ For an analysis of the Donetsk regional identity, see Oksana Mikheeva, “Ne vse tak prosto z tyny ukrainsiamy . . .,” *Otechestvennye zapiski* 1 (2007), 97–106. On recent transformations in Dnipropetrovsk, see Andreï Portnov, “Dnepropetrovsk. Tam, gde nachinaetsia Ukraina,” *Gefter*, June 27, 2014, <http://gefter.ru/archive/12617>.

make important discoveries in these cities. A case in point is the experience of Yuri Andrukhovych.

In the 1990s, Andrukhovych published an essay in which he thanked God for his hometown in west Ukraine, given that the country's eastern cities barely differ from each other.¹²¹ With time, however, he heeded the idea behind his friend Zhadan's call: "Donbas is hardly known inside the country. . . . One needs to come here, look around, explore, and then make your conclusions."¹²² As a result, in 2006 Andrukhovych courteously noted in an internet conference: "I have reconsidered my ignorance regarding Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Luhansk."¹²³ Furthermore, following a visit to Dnipropetrovsk, he humorously withdrew his earlier judgment on the pages of a recent book: "I was completely wrong back in 1994. . . . Now I must fall to my knees and beg [the residents of Dnipropetrovsk] forgiveness for that old frivolous nonsense."¹²⁴

The false stereotype of a culturally impoverished east Ukraine, indeed, does not reflect the actual complexity of the eastern lands. Unfortunately, the links of oligarchy to cities like Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk continue to evoke negative reactions around the country. But if narratives of the past were examined on their own in any one region, they might appear fairly monolithic (and sometimes, even authoritarian).¹²⁵ Their interplay is what leads to the emergence of

¹²¹ Yuri Andrukhovych, *Dezorientatsiia na mistsevesti* (Ivano-Frankivsk: Lileia-NV, 1999).

¹²² "Sergei Zhadan o natsionalizme."

¹²³ "Internet-konferentsiia Andrukhovycha na Maidani," January 26, 2006, <http://andrukhovych.info/internet-konferenciya-andruxovicha-na-majdani>.

¹²⁴ Andrukhovych, *Leksykon*, 131.

¹²⁵ A column on "Paradoxes of Ukrainian democratic thinking" by Victoria Narizhna includes a reference to "pro-Ukrainian totalitarianism" (Victoria Narizhna, "Vsi proty protyvsikhiv, abo paradoksy ukrains'koho demokratychnoho myslennia, *Historians-in-UA*, October 22, 2012, <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/avtorska-kolonka/421-vsi-proty-protyvsikhiv-abo-paradoksy-ukrainskoho-demokratychnoho-myslennia>). At the same time, Portnov warns against ascribing too much depth and tolerance to the "situational pluralism" anywhere in Ukraine (Andreï Portnov, "Ekskursiia po izbrannykh pamiatnikam Vtoroi mirovoi voïny v sovremennoi Ukraini," *Uroki istorii. XX vek*, June 11, 2010, <http://www.urokiistorii.ru/memory/place/2010/11/pamyatniki-vov-ukraina>).

hues that render the nation's map meaningful. The myth of Two Ukraines collapses not just because of its antagonistic simplifications, but also because it presupposes an internal border where there is none. Voices from various parts of the nation constantly intermingle and influence each other.¹²⁶ Their interaction and confrontation—their polyphony—sustain the fluctuating processes of democracy in Ukraine.

These days the function of the border between Ukraine and Russia is carried out by the entire eastern part of the Kharkiv oblast. Two tendencies, construction and deconstruction of boundaries, evolve there simultaneously:

The new reality of the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands is not determined only by Kiev and Moscow; the border regions claim to have their own voice, not only in terms of political and economic interests, but also in terms of the ideology of Ukrainian-Russian cooperation and its cultural and historical legitimization.¹²⁷

This “own voice” could be the phenomenon Mathijs Pelkmans referred to when he noted: “A view from the border highlights the contradictions and imperfections in the grand narratives of nations and states. . . . along borders nationalizing policies are regularly defeated, ignored, or redirected.”¹²⁸ Geopolitical scientists, too, argue that borderland populations typically form a local identity in opposition to the national one.¹²⁹ Sahlins's argument that “the proximity of the other across the French-Spanish boundary structured the appearance of

¹²⁶ Some Soviet aesthetics, for instance, found their way into today's monuments to Stepan Bandera, one of the leaders of the national movement in west Ukraine. “The pedestal is high, the hero is focused and determined, his glory is unquestionable. Other post-Soviet monuments to Bandera uphold the same motifs, recognizable in Soviet monuments to revolutionary activists” (Portnov, “Ekskursiia”).

¹²⁷ Zhurzhenko, “Cross-Border Cooperation, Part 2,” 503.

¹²⁸ Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 215.

¹²⁹ *Rossiisko-ukrainskoe pogranič'e: dvadtsat' let razdelennogo edinstva*, ed. Vladimir Kolosov and Ol'ga Vendina (Moscow: Novyi khronograf, 2011), 292.

national identity long before local society was assimilated to a dominant center” is applicable to Sloboda Ukraine.¹³⁰

Sloboda does not just contest the grand narratives of the cultures that overlap in its lands; it reshapes them into a new storyline that might find some rationalization in the postcolonial concept of hybridization.¹³¹ The resulting zone forms a porous world where no tonalities are clear-cut, and where most people are therefore not too preoccupied with finding pure notes. Perhaps the ensuing flexibility of views is what Daphne Berdahl refers to when she observes that, paradoxically, the ambiguity of borderlands can end up creating clarity.¹³² In the case of Sloboda, and of Kharkiv in particular, this clarity takes the form of a general lack of preoccupation with ethno-national issues (of course, not without exceptions, particularly since 2014). Consequently, “in everyday life, one can see the desire of the city’s residents to ‘have it both ways,’ allowing the presence of not only Ukrainian and Russian identities but also any other identity.”¹³³

This discourse of multiculturalism is among the region’s top narratives, though a number of scholars have expressed concerns that tolerance is not always distinguishable from indifference. Some have gone so far as to point out that general political disinterest appears to be

¹³⁰ Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 9.

¹³¹ Postcolonial studies focuses in part on the issue of national identity in colonized countries. People in these countries may choose the colonizer’s influence over their original culture or reject it altogether; however, they can also combine the two. Homi Bhabha has written extensively on the dual consciousness of writers in colonized cultures, referring to their cultural hybridity. This hybridity is not a mere mingling of two cultures but a “reevaluation of the symbol of national authority as the sign of colonial difference” (Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* [London: Routledge Classics, 1994], 112). For more on postcolonialism in the context of Ukrainian literature, see Marko Pavlyshyn, “Demystifying High Culture? ‘Young’ Ukrainian Poetry and Prose in the 1990s,” in *Perspectives on Modern Central and East European Literature: Quests for Identity*, ed. Todd Patrick Armstrong (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 10–24; Myroslav Shkandrij, “The Postcolonial Perspective,” in *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 259–68.

¹³² Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 232.

¹³³ Kravchenko, “Kharkiv: A Borderland City,” 250.

the region's hallmark trait.¹³⁴ But as Rodgers maintains, "individuals in Ukraine's eastern borderlands are not per se against playing a role in the politics of identity in Ukraine. Rather, they desire a negotiation of the content of such an identity."¹³⁵

Overall, formation of identity in Sloboda Ukraine serves as "an alternative to the ethnically and linguistically determined national idea, as a rejection of the false opposition of imperial Russia and colonial Ukraine."¹³⁶ In a public debate on borderlands, conducted in Kharkiv in 2011 as part of the "Lessons of [Czesław] Miłosz for Ukraine" project, a borderland was described as more than just a sum of cultures: "It has its own properties. Connective tissue also has its own identity."¹³⁷

Scholars continue to disagree on the further specificities of the culture to which the city belongs. The demise of the Soviet Union has left the post-Soviet countries with a daunting task of having to define or redefine themselves and their relationship with their neighbors. Recent scholarship on nationalism indicates that "far from being an assimilatory experience, an empire allows for the articulation of ethnic differences," but these processes have been far from straightforward.¹³⁸ "Doubtlessly, the local culture is different from the 'northern neighbor' . . . but it still does not stop being Russian," writes one analyst about Kharkiv.¹³⁹ Others retort: "With every new push of the empire Kharkiv became less and less Ukrainian, but, interestingly enough, this has not made it culturally Russian—only the dominance of Russian language, in its southern variations, could be observed."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Kravchenko, "Kharkiv: A Borderland City," 221.

¹³⁵ Rodgers, "Understanding Regionalism," 171.

¹³⁶ Zhurzhenko, "Cross-Border Cooperation, Part 2," 508.

¹³⁷ "Pohranichchia. Zona velykykh ieresei," *Polit.ua*, December 15, 2011, <http://polit.ua/articles/2011/12/15/milosz.html>. The title of this event, "Zona velykykh ieresei," was adopted from a biography of Bruno Schulz (Jerzy Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy: Bruno Schulz—A Biographical Portrait*, ed. and trans. Theodosia Robertson [New York: W. W. Norton, 2003]).

¹³⁸ Serhy Yekelchuk, *Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 5.

¹³⁹ Stanislav Minakov, "Khar'kov: priznaki zhizni," *Znamia* 5 (2001).

¹⁴⁰ Mel'nykiv and Tsaplin, "Severo-vostok."

Curiously, such debates employ Wilson's survey terms of "more" or "less" Russian or Ukrainian, discussed earlier. Regardless of which of these options each scholar—or resident of Ukraine—leans toward, what matters is that these gradations exist, and are in constant use. The alleged traits of Sloboda Ukraine are illuminated once more: "its tolerance of ethnic and cultural diversity and its natural bilingualism."¹⁴¹ It becomes clear that, as a result of a number of forces, Sloboda forms a space of interwoven and interrelated social processes that do not always fit into the interpretive framework of present-day national paradigms. In such cases the most readily available options are to work on adjusting the space, or to think of adjusting the paradigms.



The world of human beings frequently operates in line with the fashions of time, which include mainstream thinking patterns. Today, more than twenty years into the post-Soviet era, denunciation of all things Soviet is a common strategy of dealing with the past. This mental censure sometimes loses perspective of the many complex attributes of the fallen country, such as its remarkable dissident movement. Like most other things, pasts come in gradations of color, not only in black and white. The case of Kharkiv confirms Martínez's observation that "questions of national identity emerge as borderlanders fuse their culture with that of their neighbors, creating new social patterns that people in heartland zones may find abhorrent."¹⁴² When it manifests itself in divisive paradigms like the myth of Two Ukraines, such abhorrence overlooks both the complex identity processes happening in the borderlands and the ways in which this geopolitical "periphery" gave birth to the cultural "center."

Attaching the label of nationalism to the mere sound of Ukrainian or the label of imperialism to the mere sound of Russian leads to one predictable result: resentment. Equating the usage of one of the nation's languages with oppression of the other ensures that people on all sides continue to defend their tongue. This keeps their focus away from the country's economic and social problems, as Zhadan explains:

¹⁴¹ Vladimir Grinev, "Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie i kul'turno-istoricheskie aspekty regional'noi politiki v Ukraine," *Region* 2–3 (1998), 13.

¹⁴² Martínez, *Border People*, 25.

Stereotypes exist on both sides, and in no way do they correspond to reality. . . . [These stereotypes] are provoked by authorities and politicians, including oppositional ones. They benefit from a split Ukraine: Donbas and Galicia, with no understanding between the two. As long as this outlook survives, these politicians will remain in power.¹⁴³

The geographical proximity of Russia, as well as its politics in the past centuries, has affected east Ukrainians in tangible ways. They have incorporated such influences into an identity of their own, retaining Ukraine as their country, but expecting their perception of their place within this country to be acknowledged and recognized without an automatic inclination to correct or fix them. In answering questions such as “Is the Russian language an imperial legacy, imposed on the denationalized Ukrainians in the East, or is it rather a legitimate part of their national identity as Ukrainian citizens?”¹⁴⁴ this chapter argues for the latter.

The stripping of the past is akin to surgery. It is hardly surprising if the procedure’s subjects rebel against it in ways that are accessible to them—such as pulling away from national power debates altogether, and thus earning allegations of indifference. As scholars who study the region insist, understanding Ukraine’s culture as ethnicity-based does not make sense in the east, where “the majority of ethnic Ukrainians also embrace Russian culture.”¹⁴⁵ Before the war “individuals in these cities wanted to take part in the nation-building project, yet rejected any attempts to wholly negate their region’s specific historical links” with Russia.¹⁴⁶ After the war’s onset, the former began to outweigh the latter for many people. This is one reason behind the bitter joke that the current president of the Russian Federation has been one of the most successful consolidators of the Ukrainian nation.

¹⁴³ “Sergei Zhadan o natsionalizme.”

¹⁴⁴ Zhurzhenko, “Myth.”

¹⁴⁵ Serhy Yekelchuk, “Writing the History of Ukrainian Culture before, under, and after Communism,” *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 20 (2006): 28.

¹⁴⁶ Rodgers, “Understanding Regionalism,” 171.

"Are these blurred boundaries likely to persist?" asks Wilson.¹⁴⁷ But how grounded is the perception of blurred boundaries as a serious problem whose persistence should be a cause for concern? Conceptually divided into west and east, the real Ukraine—in all its vastness and diversity—breaks expectations and establishes itself as a complex yet sound country. Against this background, an astute observation rings true:

The irony of these times . . . is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient.¹⁴⁸

Should Ukraine be molded into a culturally and ethnically uniform nation? Some would say yes; others would disagree. The debate continues, highlighting or contesting the difference between nation-building and nationalization. Meanwhile, the country's national identity remains "one of the most influential and underestimated sociocultural phenomena of its kind in modern European history."¹⁴⁹

In their introduction to *Cities after the Fall of Communism*, John Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, and Blair Ruble apply Anselm Strauss's question "What time is this place?" to the postsocialist city.¹⁵⁰ In a slightly odd reversal of this phrase, another question might be: "What place is this time?" This time—our time—is a place of a multitude of human identities, including flexible and open ones. It is a place of mixed remembrance trajectories and complicated, multifaceted pasts. It is a place where notions espousing ethno-national identity correction can appear to be nothing short of authoritarian. It is a place, too, where "a desperate desire to be understood, heard, and comforted" continues to form a crucial part of basic human needs, sustained by the myriad of traumatic events of the past century (and of the current one as well).

¹⁴⁷ Wilson, "Elements."

¹⁴⁸ Gupta and Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture,'" 10.

¹⁴⁹ Finnin, "Ukrainians."

¹⁵⁰ Anselm L. Strauss, *Images of the American City* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1976); Czaplicka, Gelazis, and Ruble, "Introduction," in *Cities*.

In general, Ukraine's eastern regions remain simplified and under-represented in today's popular consciousness, both within the country and beyond its borders. This oversight spills over into other fields, such as literature. Zhadan formulates it as follows: "One of the main problems of modern Ukrainian literature is the under-expression of the country's regions; writers talk mostly about Kyiv or Galicia. . . . As for me, I plan to continue working with east Ukraine."¹⁵¹

True to his word, Zhadan's Kharkiv-based writing is prolific. His 2010 novel *Voroshylovhrad* has been viewed as an important alternative paradigm for separating from a totalitarian past.¹⁵² Voroshylovhrad (or, in Russian, Voroshilovgrad) is the former name of the city of Luhansk, located in the Donbas region. Luhansk became Voroshilovgrad for the first time in 1935, in honor of military commander and politician Kliment Voroshilov. In the course of the twentieth century the city switched back and forth several times before finally regaining its original name in 1990. Zhadan's novel plays with layers of time symbolized by these historically dissimilar references to a single east Ukrainian location. The next chapter explores and interprets this award-winning work of fiction.

¹⁵¹ "Zhadan: Ukrainskoi literature nuzhny novye geroi," interview by Konstantin Skorkin, *Vostochnyi variant*, April 7, 2011, <http://v-variant.com.ua/articles/24859-sergej-zhadan-ukrainskoj-literature-nuzhny-novye.html>.

¹⁵² Tamara Hundorova, "Voroshylovhrad i porozhnecha," *LitAkcent*, February 8, 2011, <http://litakcent.com/2011/02/08/voroshylovhrad-i-porozhnecha>.

Chapter Two

FRONTIERS OF EMPTINESS*

It always seemed to me, and still does, that the most important thing is to be able to recollect everything.

—Serhiy Zhadan (2010)

In December 2010, the BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year prize was awarded to writer Serhiy Zhadan for his novel *Voroshylivhrad*. Four years later, in December 2014, *Voroshylivhrad* was named the BBC Book of the Decade. This literary work interlaces black humor and uncensored language (peoplespeak) with the harsh realities of post-Soviet life. The result is a collection of adroitly forthright reflections on today's Ukraine, in all its complexities and contradictions. Among these complexities, the country's past plays a key role.

The author has referred to his novel as “a metaphor of memory.”¹ Indeed, *Voroshylivhrad* deals with remembering and recollection—or lack thereof—in great depth. Highlighting the book's preoccupation with

* An earlier version of this chapter was published as Tanya Zaharchenko, “While the Ox Is Still Alive: Memory and Emptiness in Serhiy Zhadan's *Voroshylivhrad*,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 55 (2013): 45–69.

¹ “Voroshylivhrad—tse metafora pam'iaty,” *OstroV*, April 6, 2011, <http://www.ostro.org/lugansk/culture/news/171750>.

this theme, this chapter examines Zhadan's use of the duality of memory and emptiness as a productive metaphor for the challenges facing the "post-totalitarian person."² A legacy of catastrophe and suppressed knowledge can render memory so significant and prevalent that—like in *Voroshyllovhrad*—it is presented as the basis of life, and is equated to being. Using these qualities of memory to help his characters navigate a mystical landscape where the dead and the living, like the past and the present, are eternally intertwined, Zhadan sets up a literary mechanism that helps them plot their routes, and keeps them grounded.

To identify and examine the memory-emptiness dichotomy in Zhadan's novel, the present chapter analyzes and interprets several crucial scenes of the narrative. In the process, I contend that in *Voroshyllovhrad*, remembering is to being like forgetting is to nothingness, and that the novel's voids employ its reader as a key agent of recollection. As a result, the paradigms of dealing with a complex past are recalibrated, as that past ends up being processed rather than severed.

Recall the argument by Bosteels, Mirella, and Schilling: fiction produces representations that enhance our grasp of shared experiences. In these terms, this chapter's approach to *Voroshyllovhrad* is a study of the novel's "narrative enactments" in search of the "frames of references" it puts forward.³ Among these frames, the memory-emptiness juxtaposition is crucial.

The author describes his own book as "a novel about memory, about the importance of memory, about the continuity of memory, and about the fact that you must remember everything that happened to you—that's what lets you mold your future."⁴ Indeed, among all the porous boundaries in the novel, the one crossed most frequently is between present and past. Alexander Kratochvil observes that *Voroshyllovhrad* is not about traveling back in time; rather, the past is continually tangible and present as a parallel spatiotemporal dimension.⁵ Like

² Hundorova, "Voroshyllovhrad."

³ Bosteels, Mirella, and Schilling, "The Politics of Totality," 111.

⁴ "Serhiy Zhadan: Voroshyllovhrad—roman pro zakhyst svoikh pryntsyviv," *Hrechka: molodizhnyi online-zhurnal*, September 23, 2010, <http://gre4ka.info/kultura/111-68serhii-zhadan-voroshyllovhrad-roman-pro-zakhyst-svoikh-pryntsypiv-vid-zovnishnoho-tysku>.

⁵ Kratochvil, "Nazad."

the makeshift map of the Soviet Union on one character's wall—composed of disposable pieces of a discarded lifestyle: labels from bottles of alcohol, political leaflets, pornographic images, and even someone's driving license—the narrative's many motifs come together to form a sketch of what Tamara Hundorova identifies as an alternative paradigm for parting with the totalitarian past, in lieu of “rupture and oblivion.”⁶ This recalibrated architecture of separation is among the novel's top accomplishments.

The last barricade

Zhadan, who lives and works in Kharkiv, is one of the key personalities in modern Ukrainian literature. “Ukraine, both east and west, shares a love for him,” maintains his literary colleague, writer Andreï Krasniashchikh.⁷ It takes a certain degree of dexterity to tackle the grey areas of post-Soviet reality in a way that is unassuming and poignant in equal measure. Zhadan, who made his début as a poet, may have found that elusive balance.⁸ Referring to the intermingling of the prosaic and the poetic in *Voroshylivhrad*, Kratochvil calls it a successful synthesis of these two spheres of creativity.⁹ Zhadan's prose, which intertwines witty satire and somber thoughtfulness with soft touches of ever-present death, is a relatively recent phenomenon. This mode of writing, however, is becoming increasingly important to his self-expression as an artist.

The significance of memory and forgetting emerged as a topic of particular interest for Zhadan during his early years as a poet. In “Iak-shcho ty nadumaiesh ikhaty z ts'oho mista” (If you decide to leave this city), for instance, the lyrical persona promises to pray for an émigré: “for all you forgot here / and all you are forgetting now / wherever you may end up / for all you will forget later / and most important—for your

⁶ Hundorova, “Voroshylivhrad.”

⁷ Andreï Krasniashchikh, interview by the author, January 3, 2011.

⁸ Zhadan notes his own ability to talk about these places with tenderness that stops short of pathos, and with hardness that stops short of accusation. See Dmytro Desiateryk, “Nebesnyi Voroshylivhrad,” *Den'* 29 (2011), <http://www.day.kiev.ua/uk/article/marshrut-no1/nebesniy-voroshilivgrad>.

⁹ Kratochvil, “Nazad.”

memory, for memory.”¹⁰ Rostyslav Mel’nykiv and Yuri Tsaplin observe in their analysis of contemporary Kharkiv literature that Zhadan’s early poetry sought to attribute Ukrainian traits to the multicultural world of the modern Ukrainian city. With time, however, his interest shifted from his own country to the multicultural world per se. His poems began to span both sides of the Atlantic, with the poet’s attention increasingly drawn to outlaws and outsiders everywhere.¹¹ With this shift of focus, his lyrics progressed from relatively uncomplicated rhymes to lengthy and multilayered free verse. Zhadan’s next step as an artist was the addition of prose to his repertoire. The first novel came out in 2003; others followed in quick succession. “[His] prose is as poetic as his free verse was prosaic,” observed critics.¹²

His success won him the reputation of one of Ukraine’s most important contemporary authors, with works translated into Armenian, Belarusian, Croatian, English, German, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Serbian, and Swedish.¹³ Most of his novels are masterful explorations of remembering and its discontents. On the scene of modern Ukrainian literature Zhadan maintains a reflective, thoughtful, yet humorous voice that personalizes the past and its traumas, turning memory into an intensely individual experience. This sets him apart from some more divisive and dogmatic literary presences.

I focus on the theme of remembering in *Voroshyllovhrad* without implying that it constitutes the book’s only topic. In fact, the author foregrounds a number of themes in his novel. Among these are lawlessness, freedom (real and imaginary), and many blurred boundaries, including the tenuous line between reality and dreamland. By choosing to highlight the dichotomy of memory and emptiness as one of the book’s prominent themes, this chapter seeks to emphasize that empti-

¹⁰ Serhiy Zhadan, “Iakshcho ty nadumaiesh ikhaty z ts’oho mista,” in *Ballady pro viĭnu i vidbudovu* (Lviv: Kal’variia, 2001).

¹¹ In 2015, ten of Zhadan’s poetry collections were released under one cover as *Hospod’ sympatyzuie autsaideram* (God sympathizes with outsiders) (Kharkiv: Klub Semeinogo Dosuga, 2015).

¹² Mel’nykiv and Tsaplin, “Severo-vostok.”

¹³ For insightful coverage of Zhadan’s work before *Voroshyllovhrad*, see Vitaly Chernetsky, “From Anarchy to Connectivity to Cognitive Mapping: Contemporary Ukrainian Writers of the Younger Generation Engage with Globalization,” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 44 (2010): 102–17.

ness, as a kind of forgetting, is among the most influential forces in the post-Soviet space today.¹⁴ It extends into multiple dimensions of life: emptiness can be economic, moral, spiritual, intellectual, emotional. When it reaches memory, however, all kinds of pitfalls await. The result is “a black hole that soaks up the past,” though under some conditions, “the future is born there as well.”¹⁵ The responsibility for making this birth happen is what connects the characters and the readers.¹⁶

An analysis of symbols used to represent the key notions of memory and emptiness throughout the book shows that in the long run, the abyss of transitional nothingness is confronted and defied only through a person’s conscious decision to remember one’s own past, regardless of its complexity. The resulting link to one’s authentic inner essence becomes a reliable grounding force amidst the disorientating effects of external societal unrest. Memory is presented as the only effective counterweight to nonexistence, an anchor that keeps us steady, an essential part of us to be protected.

Another doubletake writer from Kharkiv, Anastasiia Afanas’eva (b. 1982), formulates this idea in her own work: “To forget means to stop being.”¹⁷ Likewise, across the border, in Vladimir Makanin’s *Andegraund, ili Geroï nashego vremeni* (Underground, or a Hero of our time, 1999), the narrator muses: “If it wasn’t for the counterweight of our past (*protivovoves nashego proshlogo*), which we use to explain ourselves to ourselves, we would not be able to preserve any strong feelings inside. We’d simply disintegrate.”¹⁸ Herman, the protagonist of *Voroshyllovhrad*, eventually comes to a similar conclusion. But who is the agent of remembering? In the post-Soviet arena, this is one of the top questions to tackle. In its style, through the use of contextual gaps and time-warps, Zhadan’s novel invites the reader to participate in its own construction.

¹⁴ For examination of kenoticism (from the Greek *kenós*, or empty) in post-Soviet Russian literature, see Hans Günther, “Post-Soviet Emptiness (Vladimir Makanin and Viktor Pelevin),” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4 (2013): 100–106.

¹⁵ Hundorova, “Voroshyllovhrad.”

¹⁶ “Metafora mynulogo, shcho poiednuie i pov’iazue vsikh spil’nistiu . . . vidpovidal’nosti” (Desiateryk, “Nebesnyi”).

¹⁷ Anastasiia Afanas’eva, *Soldat belyi, soldat chërnyï* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2010), 88.

¹⁸ Vladimir Makanin, *Andegraund, ili Geroï nashego vremeni* (Moscow: Geleos, 2008), 60.

Voroshylivhrad is a word that no longer exists on our maps. Having switched back and forth several times—in 1935, 1958, and 1970—the city returned to its original name, Luhansk, in 1990. Zhadan, who was born in its vicinity in 1974, took the vanished term as a symbol of traveling back through time. In his own words, “it’s a return into the past, a return into emptiness, a plunge into some temporal hole.”¹⁹ The main character, Herman,²⁰ is a seemingly impassive mid-level manager who leads an uneventful and ordinary life until, one brutally early morning, he is awakened by a phone call from a frantic old friend to learn that his brother, owner of a suburban gas station in eastern Ukraine where they all grew up together, has disappeared without a trace.²¹

This starts the novel’s journey back through time and space. Herman promptly travels to the gas station for one day “to sort things out.” But he ends up staying for good. He meets the gas-miners (*hazovyky*) who live in the endless flatlands, even though the state that had recruited them no longer exists; relentless raiders who scoop up properties by any means necessary while suffering from demons of their own; women with vague biographies; wandering tribes with curious traditions; and a whole set of other peculiar personalities. But most important, he meets his own past—friends he grew up with, men nearly broken (or killed) by the turbulent 1990s. Finding an honest way to approach and comprehend the fate of these men appears to be Zhadan’s primary ambition. *Voroshylivhrad* is a writer’s attempt to engage in the intricate task of penetrating time. This may be one of the reasons he “invests heavily into the (quasi-)autobiographical mode.”²²

¹⁹ Kratochvil, “Nazad.”

²⁰ The original meaning of this word is “army man” (Arman). It derives from the Germanic *heri* (army). As we shall see, this name is more than fitting for Herman’s progress through the novel.

²¹ Interpreting the older brother’s vanishing as a “post-totalitarian allegory,” Hundorova discusses it as a disappearance of Russian influence in Ukraine (Hundorova, “Voroshylivhrad”). Interestingly, throughout the narrative Herman repeatedly dials a western phone number in an attempt to reach his brother, who is presumed to have fled westward. There is no reply until a stranger finally picks up and offers her own story instead of answering his inquiry. Along the lines of Hundorova’s analysis, then, we might view this as commentary on Ukraine’s searching for solution in the West after Russia’s influence declines. In the novel, there is no ready answer on either one of those sides.

²² Chernetsky, “From Anarchy to Connectivity,” 109.

As Herman reluctantly reacquaints himself with the region of his youth, with the lands and people he had once left behind, a team of raiders expresses interest in acquiring the gas station. At first he refuses to sell it almost intuitively. But as he grows increasingly conscious of the need to defend everything this small business has come to represent, a full-fledged conflict unfolds. It starts with classic conversations in the back of a black SUV, develops into exploding gasoline trucks, includes a brutal hanging of an elderly and gentle dog named Pakhmutova²³ and, finally, culminates with senseless and unplanned murder. Throughout the struggle, however, Herman appears to grow in strength, confidence, and sense of inner purpose, as he identifies and articulates principles that render his life meaningful. Translator Elena Marinicheva contends, “The wretched gas station is not simply business; it is a theory of existence of his brother’s friends and their friends, a mission that makes their lives meaningful; the last barricade to be defended.”²⁴

In these difficult times of transition, when people are “uprooted from the ground and hung up in the air,”²⁵ the station turns out to be the last resort for those who have lost all else. Herman stays because he begins to understand this. In the endless fields of eastern Ukraine, surrounded by all who live, love, hunt, and die there, he becomes a catcher in the (Ukrainian) maize, in a curious parallel to Holden Caulfield, who dreamt of saving those lost in the (American) rye. Unlike Holden, Herman does not quite desire this role; instead, he grows into it. His initial reaction was that of inconvenienced bewilderment,²⁶

²³ Aleksandra Pakhmutova was a well-known popular song composer in the USSR. Though still living (b. 1929), she appears to be forgotten at this time. The writer’s choice to name a murdered dog after a shunned symbol of the past could tie in to the murder of that past itself.

²⁴ Elena Marinicheva, “Knizhnaia polka Eleny Marinichevoi,” *Novyi mir* 1 (2011), http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2011/1/kn17.html.

²⁵ Hundorova, “Voroshylovhrad.”

²⁶ “Only a few days ago I was considered a free and independent expert, fighting who-knows-whom in the name of democracy, and now this real estate hung around my neck, and something had to be done about it, because my brother was no longer around and no one else could fake my signature” (Zhadan, *Voroshylovhrad*, 48).

but in the course of the novel he shifts from resentment to a sense of visceral moral purpose. When colleagues from a previous job arrive and summon him to return, he refuses. “Why do you need this? Let’s go home. This isn’t your business.”—“They burned my truck. And hanged my dog. This isn’t business at all.”²⁷

The defense of this last barricade from the callous raiders becomes a mission that unites the previously aloof Herman with those who surround him now. Among them is Olha, the station’s attractive financial manager, the only woman he does not sleep with. It is possible to find storyline evidence, however, that she is the one Herman develops feelings for. And it is with Olha that one of the novel’s most important scenes takes place: a night in an abandoned pioneer camp.

A story in old drawings

Herman’s first lesson in protecting his property is offered by an old man, formerly a powerful communist official, now a grumpy resident of a nursing home. Herman and Olha seek him out for a favor regarding some papers pertaining to the gas station. The bad-tempered patient initially refuses. This forces Herman to swallow a shot of rum and formulate, for the first time, his emerging way of reasoning:

If it was only about me, I would have dropped all this already and gone somewhere far away, don’t you see? . . . But somehow it’s not only about me. It’s about something very important, and perhaps I don’t even fully comprehend this importance yet, . . . but damn it, Hnat Iurovych, does one really need to have a party service record in order not to shit himself in a critical situation?²⁸

Taken aback by the unexpectedly emotional monologue, Hnat Iurovych agrees to help, but only after a series of conditions is met. He requests, for instance, to have Herman’s music player. When it is obediently handed over, however, the old man remarks: “You must defend

²⁷ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 231.

²⁸ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 171.

things that are rightfully yours. Otherwise you'll stay just like that: without earphones, without a business, and without a party service record."²⁹ In a move characteristic of Zhadan's style, life lessons are delivered with splashes of straight-faced humor.

The portable music player, a luxury by Soviet standards, serves as a symbol of the new age—a time marked by Western influence, expensive technology, capitalism, and a certain level of freedom of expression. As such, it could also represent another important arrival of the post-Soviet era: legal private enterprise. By learning to sacrifice neither, Herman is, quite possibly, being armed for the upcoming battle.

Riding a motorcycle home after this visit, Olha and Herman get caught in a violent downpour. It traps them in the woods, in an abandoned pioneer camp where Olha used to work. The Young Pioneer Organization of the Soviet Union was a collective youth organization between 1922 and 1991; its collapse left a vast array of artifacts and sites—like campgrounds—which appear to be no longer relevant in the new postcommunist society. In *Voroshylivhrad*, however, this abandoned locus of the past serves as an alternative window into the present. After a fruitless erotic scene Olha walks out, leaving Herman alone in a metal container of a house, pounded by rain, in darkness, among old drawings lining the wall. Exasperated and exhausted, he hangs his head over one side of the bed “so that sky and earth switch places” and, suddenly, begins to read a story told by these pictures, which now appear drawn in bovine blood.

In true Zhadan fashion, this transformation leaves much up to the reader; it is never explicitly explained. It just happens: the narrative drops into a temporal black hole for a while. Slowly Herman realizes that the drawings “didn't just hang there randomly, that they created entire narratives, fragments of stories.”³⁰ Perhaps because only a few hours ago he had to formulate his first battle cry, Herman begins to see “something very important” indeed.

The ensuing description is remarkable. The first line of the drawings depicts armed men in animal masks. They destroy cities, kill trees, torture merchants, and hang pets on the balconies of apartment build-

²⁹ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 178.

³⁰ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 187.

ings (it is still days before Pakhmutova's body is found swaying in the fog). Nearby, in an aching allusion to the twentieth century, women burn the toys and clothes of the dead and scorch strange signs into each other's skin. The next set of drawings switches from red to blue, perhaps signaling a fast-forward from the Soviet era to the post-Soviet days (blue is one of the two colors of the current Ukrainian flag). Herman sees a woman give birth to a two-headed baby girl who immediately begins to speak; moreover, she speaks two languages simultaneously. This narrative, which could represent the story of post-Soviet Ukraine, ends as follows:

The last drawing depicted someone's funeral: a procession of children and the elderly dragged two crumbling houses, with no one inside, and everyone argued over which of the houses to bury. Oxen and herons surrounded them, and above them, in the sky, stars flew along dislocated orbits. And unable to decide which house to bury, the children chased a big tired ox into a ditch, and covered him in earth, thick and sticky, like peanut butter. The bull stood half-covered in this hole, like a buried German tank in its position; mysterious symbols escaped its mouth, but the children couldn't read them, because they had never learned the alphabet. They just stood nearby, clutching their shovels and listening to the creatures, who tried to tell them something important and threatening.³¹

In a national allegorical interpretation, the bilingual baby could symbolize the birth of post-Soviet Ukraine, which emerged from the USSR speaking two main languages—Ukrainian and Russian. The new country's overlapping focal points, traditionally looking east and looking west, are the baby's two heads. The houses dragged by the bizarre procession are Ukraine's alternative storylines—conflicting narratives of its recent past. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the country tried to decide which of these narratives to institutionalize and keep; it is still struggling with this issue, and its children are arguing about it, indeed.

³¹ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 187–88.

Their grave mistake is the assumption that accepting a narrative means discarding (burying) its alternatives, and that establishing a national identity is a zero-sum game. This common but faulty binary scheme overlooks the historically conditioned pluralism embedded in today's Ukrainian society. Unsurprisingly, the people in these drawings are unable to agree on a narrative to abandon. But since they are already armed with shovels in search of closure, they attempt to bury something tangible instead: an ox, the animal we commonly associate with stability, tolerance, and strength.³² And as the country's tolerance and strength are covered in earth, it still tries to speak back to the people—albeit without being understood. By the end of this chapter, however, we will identify that “important and threatening” message.

The transcultural, interstitial setting of *Voroshylivhrad* is key to understanding it—this is part of the reason chapter 1 focused at length on this aspect of the region. The expanse of the eastern border becomes a symbol for crossing boundaries, observes one critic, citing the book's “distinctly transcultural . . . geopoetry of east Ukraine.”³³ Another critic maintains that this borderland territory gives rise to a metaphysical text about Ukraine in transit.³⁴ Zhadan himself emphasizes the persistent presence of transit zones nearby, identifying it as an important feature of the novel. He points out “one of the book's key images: border as boundary between countries; between the living and the dead; between the present and the past.”³⁵ As such, *Voroshylivhrad* can be summarized through the themes of temporal and

³² The ox is “a universally benevolent symbol” of strength, patience, and steady toil, as well as “a sign of prosperity.” Because it “symbolizes mastery over humanity's animal nature, [it is] closely identified with the human community” (Hope B. Werness, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art* [New York: Continuum, 2003], 308–9). This illuminates what is being buried in *Voroshylivhrad* together with the animal. In addition, in Ukraine the ox is associated with endurance (a draft animal). Ox-headed straw effigies were burned as offerings in old rituals.

³³ Kratochvil, “Nazad.” Also of interest is a parallel drawn here to Yuri Lotman, whose theory that border areas enhance semiotic processes can be linked to the changes Herman undergoes in eastern Ukraine. See Lotman, *Stat'i po semiotike*, 15.

³⁴ Hundorova, “Voroshylivhrad.”

³⁵ Desiateryk, “Nebesnyi.”

spatial voids of east Ukrainian landscapes; migration of characters through space and time; external and internal boundary crossings; and the implications of these allegories for understanding Ukraine as a nation today.

One of these implications is that the novel creates what Kratochvil terms a postmodern sense of homeland, which transcends “merely local patriotism.” An alternative model of Ukraine emerges, creating a transcultural space “far from nationalistic adoration of homeland.”³⁶ Likewise, Hundorova points out that the ties forged in *Voroshylivhrad* are not based on bloodlines, since Herman’s biological brother has vanished. Instead, a new kind of brotherhood—socially, culturally, and nationally varied—is formed. This challenges some conventional views of the past (including the Soviet past), as well as the cliché image of eastern Ukraine as a nature reserve of all things foreign—a view molded today by politicians and Ukrainian intellectuals alike.³⁷ These interpretations affirm the country’s heterogeneity; they position *Voroshylivhrad* as an important counterweight to homogenizing attempts at post-Soviet nationalization. This would, indeed, fall in line with Zhadan’s self-declared left-of-centeredness.

Of monsters and men

The pioneers’ “monsters,” as Herman calls them, are not the only strange creatures he encounters. Otherworldly animals with lanterns on their heads—not unlike miners’ hats—also wander the expanses of eastern Ukraine. The reader hears of them several times, and it appears that they cause no harm, other than illuminating the night and frightening bystanders. One day Herman senses them right next to a mysterious train he hides in:

It seemed as if creatures roamed outside, dark animals with lanterns on their skulls, covered in spiked fur. Voices and songs resonated in my mind, . . . voices and touches of those we’ve met

³⁶ Kratochvil, “Nazad.”

³⁷ Hundorova, “Voroshylivhrad.”

remain in our memory. Even if I never leave this train, even if I stay on this bunk for all eternity, trapped and forgotten, no one will take away my recollections of things I've been through—which makes it not all that bad.³⁸

The creatures that spark Herman's plunge into this ode to memory are quite representative of the reader's experience with *Voroshylivhrad*: we sense something moving through the text, and at times, often without warning, we catch it staring at us. That something is the unsettled past which the author weaves through his story. The effect of its illumination, as in the case of women burning the clothes of the dead, can be startling. And although other monsters appear elsewhere—like the otherworldly procession Herman and his friend observe one night after getting drugged up on some very questionable sleeping pills³⁹—it is the lantern-skulled creatures who serve to pinpoint another important moment of the narrative: they walk past a ghost train.

Inside that train, the presence of a different type of monster—a human one—can be deciphered. This essential character is never directly identified. Herman hops into its world during one of his escapes from the raiders, and ends up riding along into nothingness. Later, at the mention of where he has been, others will wave him off: there is no working railroad in the area. And the strange man Herman encounters on the train readily confirms this fact: "This is a dead end branch. It was built here in case of war, for protection, to export the factories. . . . no one rides here except me."⁴⁰

These ominous messages from the past—an allusion to the 1940s, when major industrial enterprises from Ukraine were evacuated to the Soviet rear—serve to introduce our new acquaintance, a man of Herman's age, another representative of that ill-fated generation. He is well-dressed and perfectly maintained ("sleek"), with a grey face and angry eyes. Yet his anger is unfocused, nonpersonified, "as if he was

³⁸ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 290–91.

³⁹ That procession, explains Zhadan in an interview, serves to let the protagonist know that "the gateways of the past have opened up for him, ready at any time to release those he remembers and those he has forgotten," once again highlighting the importance of memory (Desiateryk, "Nebesnyi").

⁴⁰ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 300.

wearing contact lenses with an angry expression.” It could be, at least in part, resentment at getting caught in the tumultuous social and economic changes of the 1990s. But this man epitomizes a very different way of having dealt with those trials. As he waves off the bodyguards and pours Herman an expensive drink, he discusses the local people and their infuriating behavior:

I tell you, Herman: all your problems stem from the fact that you hold on to these places too much, . . . you don’t understand the power of capital. You assume that growing up here gives you the right to stay. . . . If you want to remain alive, learn to do business. . . . You’re stuck in the past, holding on to it, and no one can yank you out.⁴¹

These words can be contemplated in light of the changes that led to the rise of raiders in the postsocialist arena. As the regime crumbled, people at the top of society grabbed at broken pieces of wealth. Some grew rich very quickly, and a portion of the regular population soon mirrored this trend. After the collapse of the USSR, amid ongoing economic turmoil, many of those who could not (or chose not to) survive otherwise made a dash for property. Criminal groups formed to expropriate small businesses under the cover of general lawlessness and impunity. They quickly became a regular occurrence.⁴² For many people in today’s Ukraine, this remains a reality they must continue to face. Few of them, therefore, would fail to identify with the struggles of the small business depicted in *Voroshylivhrad*, a novel that sports a dedication to the history of Ukrainian raiders on its back cover.

The character we meet on the ghost train is a criminal who, as his words demonstrate, renounces memory, as well as the meaningfulness of its hold on its carriers. His own detached, almost nonhuman lack

⁴¹ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 296–302.

⁴² For research on primary accumulation of capital through criminal activities in post-Soviet transitional economies, see Dmitrii Zerkalov, *Reiderstvo. Monografiia* (Kyiv: Osnova, 2011) or Ararat Osipian, *Reiderstvo: korruptsionnye zakhvaty i vrazhdebnye pogloshcheniia* (Kramatorsk: KEHI Press, 2011).

of memory underlies his criminality. In a brutal scene that follows, his bodyguards try to slaughter an “incredibly meek” black sheep in one of the train compartments. All efforts to slit its throat remain unsuccessful, and the sheep is finally shot at close range. But it remains alive. Despite all their advantages over the animal, the raiders cannot quite conquer it. At this point the disgusted Herman rejects the offer to “finish her off” and hops off the train, expecting to be shot in the back. But he stays alone in the fields, and only the smell of warm steel lingers in the air as proof that the train had ever existed.

Who is the angry sleek man? We never hear his name directly, nor does he appear again. But many pages later, when the locals gather to protect an abandoned airport that serves as home to one of the story’s most intriguing characters, archaeologist Ernst Telman⁴³—this standoff leads to Shura the Traumatized’s senseless death—we learn that the raiders work for an invisible someone named Marlen Vladlenovych. Marlen is a name that stands for Marx and Lenin; Vladlenovych is a patronymic form of Vladlen, denoting Vladimir Lenin. What emerges is a capital-oriented murderer with a communist name and heritage, a shrewd nod at a convergence of ideologies gone wrong.

“No one knows him. But everyone fears him,” explains Shura. Although it is mentioned only in passing, we can see that articulating this name horrifies the raiders themselves. It must have been Marlen Vladlenovych the readers met earlier on the train. The deadly and troubled leader himself, riding around what he perceives to be his rightful property, over a glass of cognac with the main protagonist, raises the novel’s most burning themes: memory, emptiness, and what keeps us here.

⁴³ The original carrier of this name, Ernst Thälmann, was the leader of the Communist Party of Germany during much of the Weimar Republic. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1933, held in solitary confinement for eleven years, and shot in Buchenwald on Hitler’s orders in 1944. The role of references to Germany throughout the novel merits its own research, not least in light of the importance of World War II (in the form of the Great Patriotic War, as the Eastern Front was known) to constructing the Soviet identity. Its use and misuse remain a hotly contested topic in the post-Soviet space to this day.

Memory and emptiness

The theme of emptiness is pervasive throughout *Voroshylivhrad*. The Ukrainian word is potent in all its variations: *porozhnecha*, *porozhnyna*, *porozhnist*'. There are repeated references to the void of Ukrainian maize fields, to the sense of an abyss close by. This intense focus on the landscape transforms its physical hollows into temporal black holes, allowing the author to insert dreams, songs, character relocations, and mirages between the main lines of the narrative. It is as if the narrative itself is built on countless tunnels that offer inexplicable passages through its topography.⁴⁴ The first page says: *Voroshylivhrad. A novel*. An attentive reader might find it hard to resist the temptation to clarify: *A landscape novel*, referring to the temporal, spatial and, not least, textual gaps Zhadan uses to permeate its setting. In this landscape, the past becomes spatial: *chasoprostir* (timespace). One literally travels through it.

During this journey one slowly learns that emptiness is not deserted, that its *porozhnist*' is not invariable. At times it is full of creatures and of matter, all busy with the very real processes of being or forgetting—all balancing on the boundaries of life and death. For instance, shortly after the now well-known phrase "We all wanted to become pilots. Most of us became losers," the reader is offered an image of pilots who have made a forced landing in the Ukrainian wheat fields: "[They] get up and try to see something on the horizon. But there is nothing on the horizon, except the fields; they stretch eternally, and escaping them is a hopeless task."⁴⁵ The doomed pilots continue to make their way westward, following the sun, but unwilling to detach their opened parachutes, "which drag behind them like heavy crocodile tails." Perhaps in an evocation of the older Soviet generation, they have "no chance to reach anything." To use Mark Lipovetsky's formulation,

⁴⁴ "There is a particular emptiness of landscape, a certain kind of voids in time and space which need to be filled" (Polina Vovchik, "Voroshilovgrad Sergeia Zhadana otsenili v tysyachu funtov sterlingov," *Vremia*, December 14, 2010, <http://timeua.info/141210/31332.html>).

⁴⁵ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 29–30.

this scene invokes “the impossibility of escaping beyond the boundaries of a catastrophic history.”⁴⁶

Nevertheless, in Victor Pelevin’s *Chapaev i Pustota* (Chapaev and Void, 1996; known in the US as *Buddha’s Little Finger* and in the UK as *The Clay Machine Gun*), described by its author as the first novel in world literature that takes place in an absolute void, the protagonist manages to escape into this void rather than from it. In his final poetic monologue, the narrator proclaims:

And shifting form and face through flux and dissolution,
A madman bearing Emptiness for his name
Flees from the clutches of a model institution.
He knows quite well there is no time to flee,
Nowhere to go, no path on which to go there.
But more than that, this self-same escapee
Himself cannot be found, for he is nowhere.⁴⁷

Chapaev i Pustota has been widely discussed by critics and scholars alike.⁴⁸ Interestingly, a set of wandering characters in *Voroshylivhrad* seems to mirror Pelevin’s curious mechanism of escaping.

Zhadan’s *hazovyky*, gas miners sent into eastern Ukraine from the Carpathian mountains by the Soviet state “to pump gas for the country’s benefit,” enter the “endless fields” and get lost in them forever. The country that hired them has vanished from the maps, but a colony of *hazovyky* still lives a tribal life in the fields “like polar explorers on a block of ice.” Their search for natural gas has replaced all other human purposes, which they have lost. They have, quite possibly, gone mad. Once in a while they emerge to play football with the locals, and after

⁴⁶ Mark Lipovetsky, *Paralogii: Transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008), 222.

⁴⁷ Victor Pelevin, *Buddha’s Little Finger*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Penguin, 2001), 332.

⁴⁸ For an example of diametrically opposed reviews, see Dmitrii Bykov and Pavel Basinskiĭ, “Dva mneniia o romane Viktora Pelevina *Chapaev i Pustota*,” May 29, 1996, <http://pelevin.nov.ru/stati/o-dva/1.html>.

each game “dissolve in the blue haze of the steppes, filled with ghosts and natural gas.”⁴⁹

With such imagery the novel presents its reader with an oxymoron: a living vacuum. As such, it feeds into artist Eduard Shteinberg’s contemplations of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square*: “On the one hand, it is a grave into which the author planted the death of his ‘I,’ but on the other hand, death also means life.”⁵⁰ Contemporary Russian writer Tatiana Tolstaia, interestingly, considers the “square-shaped zero” of *Black Square* to be “one of the most terrifying events in art,” with the devil himself revealing to Malevich this “simple formula of nonexistence.”⁵¹

It is the gas miners, inhabitants of breathing nothingness (so credibly conveyed in *Black Square*), that get challenged to a football match by a group of Herman’s childhood companions in another one of the novel’s important episodes. A busload of reunited friends rolls along a dusty road, disoriented by that same emptiness:

The driver wandered around and got lost in all this endlessness, which stretched out before us, foreshadowing nothing good. . . . As if we moved along a territory that was devoid of perspective—it simply continued without any coordinates, just grass and maize, dust and gas.⁵²

When this group meets the gas miners, an eerie soccer match ensues, surrounded by a multitude of hungry sheep and German shepherds, all howling sadly. At the end of the game a bloody confrontation between the teams is averted (“something like overtime was about to begin”). The moment is described as follows: “Spotlights shone straight into our eyes and made the figures transparent, almost invisible, as if ghosts had gathered here to sort things out with other ghosts.”⁵³ This phrase turns out to be key to the whole scene, because, as we find out

⁴⁹ Zhadan, *Voroshyl'ovhrad*, 118–19.

⁵⁰ Eduard Shteinberg, interview by Milena Slavitska (1987), *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 111 (2011), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2011/111/sh30.html>.

⁵¹ Tatiana Tolstaia, “Kvadrat,” in *Izium* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2010), 75–87.

⁵² Zhadan, *Voroshyl'ovhrad*, 121.

⁵³ Zhadan, *Voroshyl'ovhrad*, 131.

later, none of Herman's friends (except Shura the Traumatized, but not for much longer) are alive, in the traditional sense of the word. Ernst Telman will reveal that three of them had mysteriously burned in their own cinema.⁵⁴ Later, Herman gets lost in a cemetery (again in a fierce downpour, Zhadan's much-utilized curtain between worlds and dimensions) and stumbles upon their graves.

A football match played by the dead is one of the novel's most perplexing scenes: it highlights the blurriness of borders between life and death, rendered productive by a competitive and impassioned interaction across that boundary. Indirectly, it speaks of vague borders between past and present, not just because one often morphs into the other, but also because the whole duality can be flipped entirely: the initially ghostlike team, the gas miners, arguably ends up being the more tangible of the two.⁵⁵ For Herman, too, the connection to his past—his memory—in the course of the novel ends up becoming more real and meaningful than his uneventful life in the present, where he "had a useless education. Held a vague job. I had enough money for what I was used to. It was too late for new habits to appear. Everything was acceptable."⁵⁶ These mercurial conversions show that for Zhadan, emptiness is fluid and comes in gradations.

A writer from the younger segment of Kharkiv's doubletake generation, Sashko Ushkalov (b. 1983), builds on a similar sense of meaninglessness in his *BZhd: Crazynovel* (2008). The protagonist, Baz, muses:

Everything normal, if it actually exists anywhere at all, leaves no traces in this emptiness and loneliness of the morning; it simply has no place here. As if someone's hand, nails marked with nicotine, opens the empty projector of your head and inserts black-and-white short films, and while these films play, you live, at least

⁵⁴ It would not require much imagination to sense the presence of Marlen Vladlenovych behind this briefly mentioned fact.

⁵⁵ What initially renders ghosts (Herman's friends) more substantive than men (*hazovyky*) is that the *hazovyky* are situated closer to emptiness as expressed through rootlessness: "they had nowhere to go back to—where would you return from nirvana, think about it. . . . it's as if everything replayed itself, returning back—back into nothingness, back into emptiness" (Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 120).

⁵⁶ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 4.

you think you live, but when they end, morning begins, an empty morning, without the sea.⁵⁷

Baz's journey through the novel takes him from such "empty mornings" to the sea, which he has never seen before and which he dreams of visiting. A different kind of expanse and endlessness delights him there.

For all its potent permutations, emptiness can also mean death. Towards the end of *Voroshlovhrad*, Herman picks up a mobile phone and dials the number of the murdered Shura. And after a while, someone or something picks up on the other end. Herman hears a gentle draught, which slowly grows stronger and turns into full-fledged wind that "tossed and howled, pouring in from the emptiness."⁵⁸ Voices arise out of the wind and then vanish. Heavy silence ensues. The call to death had been answered.

In light of this vast utilization of the concept and sense of *porozhnist'* one must ask: What have we got to oppose it? In such close proximity to nonbeing, how do the locals survive? There must be a way to deal with the situation Ernst Telman describes as follows:

Suddenly you find yourself in a place where everything disappears: cities, populations, infrastructure. . . . here starts endless emptiness—without sense, form, or context; real transverse emptiness, in which there is nothing even to grasp.⁵⁹

A figure of reasoning called anthypophora (hypophora) can take the form of an answer provided by the source that posed the question. Under this characterization, *Voroshlovhrad* is a vast literary anthypophora. It sets up a problem, but it also offers a solution: nothingness is best countered with memory. The key to life is the preservation of the past within oneself. Incidentally, that past is not at all ideological;

⁵⁷ Sashko Ushkalov, *BZhD: Crazynovel* (Kyiv: Fakt, 2008), 87.

⁵⁸ Zhadan, *Voroshlovhrad*, 434.

⁵⁹ Zhadan, *Voroshlovhrad*, 143–44. In an interesting parallel, the protagonist of Makanin's *Underground* uses similar imagery to describe glancing into a tunnel: "You look, and there's nothing there. A piece of darkness. A black hole. And a tentative, no-schizoid contact with ether" (Makanin, 229).

rather, it amounts to a grounding sense of inner roots that can counter the magnetism of memorylessness, as expressed in gangsterism, murder for gain, and other moral voids.⁶⁰ “Zhadan is revolutionary because he does not call for renunciation of the past, for forgetting and crossing it out, even if it was not real,” observes Hundorova.⁶¹ This recalibrated architecture of separation is a framework for another way of letting go. It rejects absolute severance, protecting one from the risk of accidentally severing oneself.

In one of its enigmatic black holes, the novel contains a sub-plot that features a spiritual ballad, sung by a Westerner who then disappears in east Ukraine without a trace. The lyrics mention memory, as well as hearts broken by its loss:

All our singing is only a recollection. . . . We say to memory:
stay with us, don't leave us alone. . . . We are all linked by these
rivers that flowed through our past. . . . Stay in our memory, o
city that old railroad cars took us from. Those who forget you
lose their peace forever: each of them disappears along with his
shredded heart.⁶²

In a parallel to Old Testament psalms—“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning”⁶³—this song mourns a lost city and celebrates it as a stronghold of memory. Voroshylovhrad, a place whose name has been claimed by history, may be today's temporal Jerusalem to those who used to know it, but can no longer return there. It is not a coincidence that the presbyter, who figures heavily in the last pages of the book and becomes an important presence in Herman's life, mixes the layers of time in his hymns: “Slavsia, nash nebesnyi Ierusalyme, druzhby narodiv nadiinyi oplot!”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Recall Marlen Vladlenovych's lament that people are holding on to their past and he cannot yank them out.

⁶¹ Hundorova, “Voroshylovhrad.”

⁶² Zhadan, *Voroshylovhrad*, 382. Here one could draw further connections to Olha, who confesses that she is terrified of railroad cars (377).

⁶³ Psalm 137:5 (King James Version).

⁶⁴ Zhadan, *Voroshylovhrad*, 207. Praise for Jerusalem mingles here with the Anthem of the Soviet Union: “Long live our heavenly Jerusalem, bulwark of peoples in brotherhood strong!”

The presbyter is another person who offers memory as a shield against emptiness.⁶⁵ Herman, who grows close to him after Shura is killed, seeks him out for advice. The inimitable, untranslatable, and normally quite unprintable “iakoho khuia, otche?” starts a monologue that describes the senseless behavior of some of their compatriots, such as the raiders.⁶⁶

They have lived here all their lives. So why are they burning everything behind them?⁶⁷ All this shit crawling out from everywhere, really getting on its feet now. . . . They have iron jaws, man, they'll tear you to pieces if need be. . . . What to do?

To this the presbyter, whose peculiar services seem to incorporate all religions—including echoes from communist anthems (recall “Ierusalyme, druzhby narodiv nadiinyi oplot!”)—answers simply: “Don’t ignore the living. And don’t forget the dead.”⁶⁸ In a separate instance, he sings together with his unconventional parish: “The most important thing is to remember the purpose you’ve been given by Providence, as well as the people who love you.”⁶⁹

The fundamentally grounding essence of remembering is mentioned also by Tamara, one of the gypsy sisters who become close to Herman. He inquires: “‘As a rule, what keeps us here is certainty in tomorrow. Are you certain of tomorrow?’—‘No,’ she admitted. ‘But I am certain of yesterday. Sometimes that can keep us here, too.’”⁷⁰ Olha,

⁶⁵ Some scholars maintain that the New Testament books commonly attributed to John the Apostle were not written by him. See, e.g., Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). A variation of this view suggests that the Apostle authored the gospel and the three epistles, but not the Apocalypse. Those who adopt this approach often attribute the Apocalypse to John the Presbyter, an obscure figure of the early Church. A presbyter’s role in announcing the Apocalypse could be an interesting way to consider this character’s role in the novel.

⁶⁶ As untranslatable as this line is, its closest equivalent might be “what the f*ck, father?”

⁶⁷ Note the allusion to emptiness and the past: an area that is artificially burned out behind someone.

⁶⁸ Zhadan, *Voroshyllovhrad*, 431.

⁶⁹ Zhadan, *Voroshyllovhrad*, 252.

⁷⁰ Zhadan, *Voroshyllovhrad*, 328.

likewise, makes a point of guarding the past within herself. Referring to the Soviet-era postcards of the city of Voroshilovgrad, she quietly muses:

Maybe these pictures are my past. Something that has been taken away from me and that I am being forced to forget. But I am not forgetting it, because it is, in reality, a part of me. Perhaps even the better part.⁷¹

Forgetting one's past, then, is not a natural process—it requires a force, an effort. Herman acknowledges this while looking at the gypsy sisters: “I stared into those bitter eyes of theirs, remembering suddenly more and more of the things I had once genuinely tried to forget.”⁷²

In a setting where the crimes of the Soviet regime gain an increasingly central role in historical discussions, the country's former citizens are commonly impelled to distance themselves from the political system that perpetrated these crimes—sometimes only to discover that the line between denouncing the regime and denouncing one's life under it can be too fine to observe. This dangerous inner crossroads of the post-traumatic consciousness, where a wrong turn can lead to an abyss, is the real focus of *Voroshilovgrad*. One can move on and reestablish oneself without having to wipe out one's history—such is its message. Perhaps that is why “black archaeologist” Ernst Telman crawls through the local woods in search of lost war trenches, and, upon finding them, spends two days lovingly sifting through their warm sand before getting picked up by police. He senses the power of the temporal roots.⁷³

⁷¹ Zhadan, *Voroshilovgrad*, 433.

⁷² Zhadan, *Voroshilovgrad*, 215.

⁷³ A paradox is worth addressing here. Zhadan is a spatial thinker, and to be spatial about forgetting means expressing the opposite of memory through space. This is what gives rise to emptiness in *Voroshilovgrad*. But, true to his style, the author is playful with this notion: forgetting is an active process, and emptiness does not always equal absence. This set-up involves different types of emptiness and can be deemed aporetic: in space, forgetting becomes emptiness, yet (as discussed earlier) it is not always a vacuum. The memory-emptiness framework remains applicable and useful, however, because it serves to show that forgetting, while standing close to non-being, is rarely absolute. One can be lured or yanked out of it, stimulated by pieces of the forgotten, like in Herman's case.

In *Anarchy in the UKR*, too, Zhadan's narrator explains that leftover fragments of Soviet aesthetics "help me identify myself and my loved ones, give me a way to hold on to my time, to feel it flutter as it tries to escape my hands."⁷⁴ Like *Voroshylivhrad*, *Anarchy in the UKR* (2005) is a celebrated work of fiction that features the themes of history and memory in eastern Ukraine, as well as the motif of a journey. Focusing on the narrator's travel through the sites where the anarcho-communist revolutionary Nestor Makhno (1888–1934) fought his battles, it incorporates numerous references to the Soviet past, its significance, and its anguish.

A reader who needs further evidence for the proposed interpretation of the memory-emptiness dichotomy can leaf back to the first pages of *Voroshylivhrad* and recall how it all started. During Herman's first trip to the gas station he is picked up by an old red "ghost bus" that seems to appear out of nowhere. All of its passengers—and the driver—are fast asleep. But someone's hand draws him to the back curtains, where he assumed was just the vehicle's back wall. He passes through an "invisible door" (yet another porous boundary) and enters a small secret room—"a place for meditation and love, a monastery cell inhabited by spirits and shadows." There he meets Karolina, a woman with a knife in her hair, who tells him: "I think you are running away so quickly because you have forgotten all that happened to you. When you remember, it won't be so easy to leave."⁷⁵ With these words she hands him something to drink, and he passes out. This scene precedes his arrival at the gas station.

Karolina's drink of remembering takes up only a page, but there is no guarantee that the rest of the novel is not a resulting dream, or that the ghost bus did not carry Herman into a parallel world where the rest of the narrative unfolds. In fact, there are no guarantees in *Voroshylivhrad* at all—only clues and hints. After all, it is hard to discern who is dead and who is alive amidst interminable emptiness, where specters play football with madmen. What we can—and should—know among these blurry boundaries is that guarding the past within ourselves can shield us from the deadly suction of nothingness, much to the chagrin

⁷⁴ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 71.

⁷⁵ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 27.

of all the Marlens in the world. Perhaps this is the “important and threatening” message from the past, which the creatures in the pioneer paintings tried to give today’s shoveling children of Ukraine: to start remembering who they are and where they come from; to rediscover that fine line between denouncing a regime and devaluing the lives lived under it; to refrain from slaying some identities in favor of others. While the half-buried ox is still alive.

The nonmissing variable

In setting up an equation involving memory and emptiness, like in any other equation, variables must be considered. This chapter argues that in *Voroshylivhrad*, forgetting is to nothingness as remembering is to being. But as already discussed, emptiness, like memory, comes in several forms. The lack or loss of individual memory can result in internal, moral emptiness. But when collective memory disintegrates, breaks down, or enters a state of conflict or melancholy, its lack or loss effectively paralyzes larger societal and cultural processes responsible for productive dealing with post-traumatic grief, such as the one generated by wars or by profound change. This brings us full circle: back to memory studies.

The emptiness that emerges when the layer of collective memory is cracked could be the blankness of trauma arising from an incomplete or failed recovery from extensive sociopolitical distress. Unlike in Germany, the regime-related trauma in Ukraine remains in a process of what we might call a rolling finale, which leads the nation to continually “reconstruct the shock of the past, as it supposedly happened.”⁷⁶ This can help explain the strange fusion of past and present in *Voroshylivhrad*: the communist capitalist Marlen Vladlenovych, the capitalist communist Hnat Iurovych; inverted drawings from the past that narrate the present; a dog with a forgotten Soviet name that is hanged by those who engage in modern forgetting quite professionally, and so on.

⁷⁶ Etkind, “Stories of the Undead,” 644.

One crucial variable can be detected in this text: agency is granted to those who wish to escape the incessant vacillation. This is achieved through textual devices rooted in indeterminacy. The unexplained black holes and gaps of the storyline serve to engage the reader in the process of filling them in, constructing the missing links, and thus in the process of remembering. “This territory is intriguing due to its explicit twilight, its reticence, its constant falling out of context,” said Zhadan of east Ukraine and of the setting it lends to *Voroshylivhrad*.⁷⁷ His belief that an individual coexists with a territory in an interactive way, “changing it and changing together with it,” allows him to set up his landscape novel to interact with the reader.

The surface of Herman’s musings and conclusions is unlikely to strike anyone as new or original: you do not sell yourself and you do not give up on your values, even if defeat in the battle against the abyss is unavoidable. This has led some critics to point out the novel’s didacticism.⁷⁸ But *Voroshylivhrad* extends far beyond this surface. “This is a novel about resistance, about confrontation, about protecting one’s principles from external pressure,” explained the author when introducing the book in Ukraine in the fall of 2010.⁷⁹ And, true to his word, he weaves his tale unobtrusively, ensuring that the choice to face (or to shrink from) the piercing illumination of the lamp-headed creatures is entirely up to the reader. When choosing the winner of its awards, the BBC did not misjudge the importance of offering these noncoercive options to the post-Soviet public, many of whom have either fought similar financial and ethical battles or watched someone else do so.

“Maybe the problem is not that they can’t do business,” was Herman’s challenge to Marlen Vladlenovych aboard the ghost train. “Maybe the problem is that you don’t give them a choice.”⁸⁰ As a writer, Zhadan remains faithful to this challenge: a reader’s own judg-

⁷⁷ Desiateryk, “Nebesnyi.”

⁷⁸ See Iryna Slavins’ka, “Serhiy Zhadan. Voroshylivhrad,” BBC, October 28, 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/ukrainian/entertainment/2010/10/101028_book_zhadan_voroshyliv_sp.shtml; Les’ Beleĭ, “Dvi retsenziĭ na Voroshylivhrad,” *LitAkcent*, September 27, 2010, <http://litakcent.com/2010/09/27/dvi-recenziji-na-voroshylivhrad>.

⁷⁹ “Serhiy Zhadan,” *Hrechka*.

⁸⁰ Zhadan, *Voroshylivhrad*, 301.

ment emerges as an important variable in shaping the text and its implications. For those who would rather carry a lighter load, flashes of memory through the lines are arranged to be easily ignored, obscured by a thriller narrative full of peoplespeak, criminals, and sex. Others, however, can just as easily choose to look through the cover story straight into the face of their own struggles, of their own crossroads, and of their own past.

A similar kind of creative luring is highlighted by Rory Finnin in an article that addresses literary reflections on the deportation of Crimean Tatars. Finnin maintains that “literature does not principally document empirical reality, but rather generates a virtual reality by stimulating the reader’s own constitutive, ideating activity.”⁸¹ Such ideation stems largely from a text’s indeterminacy, fueled by what Wolfgang Iser called the reader’s “filling the blanks with projections.”⁸² This notion is wholly applicable to *Voroshylivhrad*. The most baffling portions of its narrative are regularly and skillfully left unexplained; historically identifiable names are assigned to its characters; these characters transgress topography via nonexistent railways and emerge elsewhere among strange tribes; and every now and then time vanishes, due either to the protagonist’s drug-induced sleep or to the author’s own playfulness.⁸³ In all these cases, the indeterminacy of the resulting gaps entices the reader to fill them in order to process them.

This allocation of agency enhances the reader’s engagement with the text and, as a consequence, with the past in question. Participating in the narrative, the reader begins to synthesize his or her own novel. Such symbiotic arrangement denies the simple dichotomy of fiction

⁸¹ Finnin, “Forgetting Nothing,” 1093–94.

⁸² Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 34.

⁸³ Zhadan’s García Márquez-like surrealism is part of what gives rise to a Ukrainian voice that is both unique and familiar. At the same time, as one critic observes, he “does not sink to mystical hallucinations, because he is very good at undercutting high notes with comic scenes” (Liza Birger, “Pogranichnik mirov,” *Gazeta.Ru*, July 10, 2012, http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2012/07/10/a_4676421.shtml). Humor, indeed, is an essential trademark of Zhadan’s style. For his “messenger of death,” for instance, he casts a plump chicken. Such tactics contribute to keeping the weighty topics of *Voroshylivhrad* afloat.

and reality—in tune with all other blurred boundaries of the novel—and this can come as a relief to those whose reality is harsh. Although the recollections throughout *Voroshylivhrad* are presented as Herman's (the apparent "I" of the plot), their overall lack of identifiable specificity, their placement near a city with a nonexistent name, as well as their applicability to the post-Soviet context in general, suggest that the agency of remembering in fact lies with the reader, who is assigned the responsibility of making the ultimate choice in the life of the half-buried ox.

Just as the children in the drawing sequence pause and listen to their surroundings, so does the reader receive a fictionalized but live broadcast of the circumstances of his or her current life. At this intersection of fiction and reality, of memory and emptiness, summoned through the author's subtle creative luring, the reader is given a choice: Will the ox survive, or will the country's children return to shoveling until it is buried completely? Which shape inside each of us is to be illuminated by the shining lamps on the heads of roaming monsters, and what is best left untouched in the dark? The trick is the way those lantern-bearing animals of time walk through Zhadan's prose, past the ghost trains of time carrying our anxious faces: their subtlety makes it difficult to elude their illumination every single time. But judging by the intense popularity of *Voroshylivhrad*, for those aboard the train this works just fine.

Chapter Three

FRONTIERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

The line between the dead and the living, like between good and evil, lay beyond arithmetics.

—Andreï Krasniashchikh (2008)

In *Park kul'tury i otdykha* (Park of culture and leisure, 2008), a collection of short stories by Kharkiv writer Andreï Krasniashchikh (b. 1970), most events take place in the gap between life and death. This deep, inhabitable abyss is far from being a mere border between two separate worlds. As the book's description explains, "this rift (*prosvet*) is not always clearly tangible on a daily basis, but it is quite noticeable when ghosts and corpses emerge from it. Or when our dreams and fantasies leak into it."¹ In an interesting parallel, Zhadan observes in a separate piece of writing: "Literature is composed not so much from poems and novels as from these routine encounters between the living and the dead."² Krasniashchikh's collection is dedicated to such "routine encounters." A large portion of his book is organized into a map of an amusement park: each story comes under a title of a ride, easily recognizable by anyone with a Soviet childhood.

¹ Andreï Krasniashchikh, *Park kul'tury i otdykha* (Kharkiv: Tiazhpromavtomatika, 2008), back cover.

² Zhadan, "Vykhid," in *Potiah*, 42.

The geography of this amusement park may seem familiar, but at the same time—as if to remind the reader of the unreliability of maps in the post-Soviet context—each of the rides alters reality. A close scrutiny of the zone of indistinction between life and death is apparent in many of these stories. Krasniashchikh's collection contains numerous cases of visualizing experience in terms of place, including imaginary experiences such as passing away.

In the preface, Krasniashchikh proposes a number of different itineraries across its grounds, depending on the reader's age and stage of life. Both blurring of time and blurring of space can be observed along these itineraries, and a new vacillating frontier—between victims and perpetrators—is introduced. But no matter where one goes, all amusement rides (i.e., all stories) feature the appearance of the supernatural. It is a particular type of a supernatural presence, however—one whose purpose is to help navigate boundaries. In another proposed literary mode of journeying through blurriness, Krasniashchikh's texts generate skillful helpers whose origins lie in ancient mythologies.

A closer analysis of several stories in *Park* foregrounds three shared traits of these beings' presence: the smudging of life-and-death distinctions, the reversibility of the flow of time (multi-directional time-frames), and a heightened focus on dilemmas of individual agency and responsibility. In this chapter I formulate the Charon hypothesis, which contends that when all three conditions are met, the reader may be in the presence of a literary psychopomp—a mythological creature that specializes in helping people on difficult journeys, primarily the one between life and death.³ Before discussing the Charon hypothesis in more detail, it is worth visiting some of the rides the author of *Park* has set up for us. A piece called "The main entrance" may be, fittingly, the best way into the maze.

The protagonist of "Glavnyĭ vkhod" (The main entrance), Anton, joins the police force solely for the pleasure of shooting people. One day, however, the deceased relatives and friends begin appearing to him. Apparently lacking any memory of whom they used to be, they emerge in new cities under different names. They do not return to Kharkiv, where most of the story takes place, but they do not leave

³ The Greek word ψυχοπομπός (*psychopompos*) means "a guide of souls."

Ukraine, either. And they do not seem to recognize Anton. This fact appears to be particularly disturbing to him, and possibly illuminates the traumatic roots of their return from the dead: misrecognition has been discussed in scholarship as an allegory of the Soviet terror.⁴ Increasingly unsettled, Anton turns to mathematical equations for a logical explanation, but “a pattern did not emerge. The line between the dead and the living, like between good and evil, lay beyond arithmetics.”⁵ To someone who never quite grasped the margins of the latter, the former appears hazy as well.

What follows is the professional killer’s attempt to engage with the dead in order to work out a “system” to account for them and explain the encounters. The usual solution, killing them, does not help: they simply return in yet another reincarnation. Baffled, Anton makes an unusual move: he begins to name them after writers he has never read. His initial curiosity of a detective thus transforms into what the author calls “a reader’s interest”—an indirect nod at the literature-centricity that allows for processing tough issues when all else fails. This new interpretive framework productively connects Anton’s top passions: reading books and shooting people. But two torturous unknowns remain:

Between the psychopathology of Anton’s personality and the phenomenal encounters lay an unreadable X. Between the reanimated corpses and the unread books lay a similarly vague Y. These X and Y not so much destroyed the system he had built; rather, they prevented it from turning into a dogma, a belief, a world-view.⁶

Hunting down the X and Y soon becomes Anton’s primary obsession.

⁴ For misrecognition following repressions, see Alexander Etkind, “A Parable of Misrecognition: *Anagnorisis* and the Return of the Repressed from the Gulag,” *Russian Review* 68 (2009): 623–40. Though Anton does not participate in Soviet terror, he is a new kind of government-sanctioned executioner, one from the 1990s. A familiar past forms the underworld of his actions. These links are exposed on the last pages of the story, when we learn about the political repressions against another character—someone named Charon.

⁵ Krasniashchikh, “Glavnyi vkhod,” in *Park*, p. 90.

⁶ Krasniashchikh, “Glavnyi vkhod,” 94.

Interestingly, a similar notion surfaces in Andreï Kurkov's *Smert' postoronnego* (1996; reprinted as *Piknik na l'du*, 1997; known in English as *Death and the Penguin*). In the course of the novel Kurkov's protagonist, Viktor, finds himself increasingly implicated in other people's deaths. The narrator muses toward the end: "He had, it seems, divined the secret of longevity. Longevity depended on calmness. Calmness was the source of confidence, and confidence allowed for the cleansing of one's life from needless anxieties."⁷ This reasoning allows Viktor to distance himself from the ethical worries connected to his unclear role in the deaths of others. Confidence had protected Anton as a killer, too. But he loses it, due to the disruption caused in his world by the unseen or missing links he dubs X and Y. His self and his identity proceed to unravel.

Something unidentifiable (at least, unidentifiable by the protagonist) connects Anton's urge to kill and his encounters with the undead. And something connects these creatures to the books he has not yet opened. These incomprehensible links, X and Y, haunt and prevent him from coming to terms with every rationalization he comes up with. He was fine with killing, and then he was reasonably okay with seeing the dead. It is his not-knowing—his inability to penetrate the inaccessible scheme behind these developments—that shatters his peace. For a murderer's confidence, it appears, coherency and clarity are fundamental. Robbed of a logical system, of a "dogma" that defined his life—or rather, with this dogma undermined—Anton's world is in pieces.

Literature-centricity, meanwhile, merges with the plot even more: Anton discovers that the undead keep pages from a 1963 issue of the *Iunost'* magazine close to their hearts. Each of these pages contains a biography of a writer, and each writer coincides with the name Anton had assigned to each person earlier. Boundaries seem to grow in vagueness as the story progresses: general haziness (zone of indistinction) now envelops issues of authorship and agency. It is unclear whether Anton somehow creates the undead according to the old biographies from *Iunost'*, or whether the pages come first, shaping the reincarnated people to his unconscious recognition. This ambiguity constitutes another parallel with Kurkov's novel, where the protagonist is a writer

⁷ Andreï Kurkov, *Smert' postoronnego* (Kyiv: Al'terpress, 1996), 168.

who composes obituaries before their subjects die. Krasniashchikh's narrator quickly assures us, however, that these "blurred borders of his inner universe did not worry Anton too much: it was bound to happen sooner or later."⁸ The "it" here might well refer to madness, though it could also mean punishment or payback.

A strange figure slowly emerges as Anton's universe unravels: Andrei Petrovich, "mad boatman and former prisoner." This mysterious character supplies the *Iunost'* pages that merge with people's identities. When Anton wants to undertake a business trip to feed his obsession with these uncanny encounters, his request is promptly approved by one Maj. A. P. Charon, head of human resources, who hands him a prayer bead wrapped in yet another biography from 1963. Sick and delirious by now (presumably due to a broken window on the train), Anton arrives to a new city and spends three days in a hotel, quietly handling the bead. A transformation takes place within him, as if triggered by this small object: "Time seemed to stop, and then it went backward . . . to his father's prayer beads, which Anton broke and could not fix."⁹

A father's prayer beads, which a son damages and cannot repair, are a crucial clue to Anton's past.¹⁰ He might have come from a religious family, if this clue is taken literally. In a figurative interpretation, his father had faith in something—in a religion, an ideology, a political system, perhaps. If prayer beads symbolize a belief system, a world-view, then Anton destroyed something that was fundamental to his father.¹¹ Perhaps he did so by emerging as an executioner from a collapsed Soviet state. There is no ideology or even reasoning in his acts; he kills solely for pleasure. Now someone handed him a reminder of

⁸ Krasniashchikh, "Glavnyi vkhod," 97.

⁹ Krasniashchikh, "Glavnyi vkhod," 99.

¹⁰ See chapter 4 for a discussion of Yuri Tsaplin's short story "Glue," in which a grandson shatters and cannot fix his grandfather's vase.

¹¹ Zhadan might be speaking of (and to) such fathers when he calls them "stonemasons of the new world [who] have returned as heroes and victors, and all they could do in that bizarre situation was to erect their plaster Holy Grail in a park of culture and leisure, hoping for the ultimate victory of communist ideas and for the good memory of their offspring, who instead will stone you to death, toppling all your monuments, having no faith in your past, having no past of their own" (Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 26).

his failure, and this memory proves to be fatal. A sudden connection to the past, which had saved Herman in *Voroshylivhrad*, kills Anton.

A possible explanation for this difference can be found in the work of Anastasiia Afanas'eva. In her texts dedicated to a well-known psychiatric hospital in Kharkiv, Saburova Dacha (where Afanas'eva is a doctor), the narrator muses:

You must remember everyone, always. Tell yourself every night: "I remember." But do not get ill [with memory], just rejoice at it, or be indifferent. Otherwise things may go in another direction—one minute, suddenly, you'll recall everything, take a thousand missed breaths at once, and . . .¹²

Unlike Herman, who welcomed the gradual reemergence of his roots, Anton gets ill with sudden memory and the past, which the bead in his hands both triggers and symbolizes. His illness is amplified by the culpability this object represents. As he lies delirious in a hotel room, his face merges with a writer's portrait from the 1963 page that A. P. Charon had handed him. He dies.

Death, however, is a transformation rather than an end. Like the *Black Square*, it encompasses both demise and rebirth. With the coming of death, Anton finally escapes his need to find the unknown variables:

Death happened as an unremarkable event of an uneventful life: Anton remained indifferent to either one. Questions, the search for patterns, and the construction of the universe as a whole stopped tormenting him. He accepted his new life without enthusiasm, but also without indignation, feeling no need to return to Kharkiv, to clarify or to understand anything.¹³

It so happens that passing away—and, with it, the end of torment caused by the unbearable X and Y—gives Anton a chance at a new life. "The vague literature-centricity of death no longer worried [him],"

¹² Afanas'eva, *Soldat belyi*, 89.

¹³ Krasniashchikh, "Glavnyi vkhod," 99.

observes the narrator.¹⁴ He starts baking bread instead of killing people. An apartment, a car, and a family quietly appear, while his former life in Kharkiv recedes into nothingness. When Andreï Petrovich visits to check up on his protégé, Anton (whose name is now Egor Valentinovich) no longer recognizes him. He has joined the undead.

With Egor Valentinovich finally at peace, the X and Y start torturing the reader of the story instead. What just happened? Perhaps a killer got a chance at a new life by assuming someone else's identity. Perhaps he descended into madness and forgot himself to the extent that set him free from his past. Perhaps death comes in the form of accepting a formulaic, literary biography in place of one's own. Perhaps a text can replace identity and provide an alternative kind of life. Or, when time stopped and rolled back in Anton's delirium, perhaps he was reborn into what he could have been, had he not broken his father's prayer beads. The significance of the 1963 issue of *Iunist'* can be considered in this context: if he is a policeman in the 1990s, he could have been born in 1963. The role of literature and unread authors becomes clearer though this latter framework: crossing the line from reality to fiction, the protagonist manages to rewrite his own memory to the extent that released him from both turmoil and wonder. "Anton started to live backward and to model his past in a new, different way," suggests the narrator.¹⁵ The character that helps him do so, Charon, is the most important character of all.

This figure is strangely reminiscent of Marlen Vladlenovych—he is equally obscure and almost as unlawful, though for different reasons. Having been repressed under Stalin, he acquired fake documents under Khrushchev and went to work for the police in order to exact revenge on the system. The story's implicit connection with the Soviet past finally becomes explicit: "Having penetrated the system, the elderly criminal helped murderers escape, providing them with new passports." He changed the lives of thousands before finally getting killed. Investigators will find a journal in which the old man recorded "all instances of ferrying his godchildren, so to speak, from this shore to the other."¹⁶

¹⁴ Krasniashchikh, "Glavnyi vkhod," 100.

¹⁵ Krasniashchikh, "Glavnyi vkhod," 100.

¹⁶ Krasniashchikh, "Glavnyi vkhod," 102.

As for Egor Valentinovich, despite rewriting himself (or being rewritten), in old age he is nevertheless picked up for the murders Anton had committed. He is brought back to Kharkiv, where prisons are now filled with tens of thousands of confused old men. They arrive from all over Ukraine, until it becomes clear that every pensioner in the country took part in “the criminal activity of A. P. Charon.” So the case is quietly closed, and the old men are released. Many remain in Kharkiv and become beggars, because the confiscation of their *Iunost*’ biographies had erased their memory. In a gratifying literary parallel, Zhadan inquires as he contemplates the Palaces of Culture vanishing in Ukraine: “Who will dare to deprive them all of their biographies? What can he offer instead?”¹⁷ The narrative of “The main entrance” ends with the prosecutor mystifyingly adding one final missing page to the reassembled 1963 magazines—from his own pocket.

Three main trends can be identified in this piece, all pointing in the same direction. First, the story’s entire framework is built on blurred boundaries: between life and death, between victims and perpetrators, between the innocent and the guilty. Second, the flow of time in the narrative changes on several occasions, acquiring unexpected directions that enable rewriting of the past. Finally, in reference to the agent of this rewriting, particular weight is given to the notion of responsibility—including the writer’s and the reader’s roles in constructing the world around them. Together, these three traits form the pillars of the Charon hypothesis I would like to put forward at this time. In a narrative where boundaries are foggy, time gets reversed and replayed, and the question of the characters’ agency (the authorship of described events) forms the story’s backbone, we could be in the presence of a literary psychopomp—either obvious or obscure among all other characters.

In Greek mythology, Charon (Χάρων) is the ferryman of Hades. He carries souls of the newly deceased across the rivers Styx and Acheron, which divide the world of the living from that of the dead. This figure comes from a tradition where death was a place, a locale one would literally journey to. More generally, a psychopomp’s role,

¹⁷ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 152. Palace or House of Culture (*dvorets* or *dom kul’tury*) was the name for leading social and educational centers in the Soviet Union.

as the guide of souls, is to help persons cross dangerous waters—whether they be between life and death, as with the original Charon, or between other shores of internal human travel. The crossing between powerlessness and accountability could be one such passage. Blurred boundaries and bilateral time are necessary for this crossing to take place, not unlike in Hades, where the deceased were neither alive nor fully dead before getting transported across the Styx—and where, for a chosen few, passage was possible in both directions. As for agency, souls had to find a way to pay for their voyage; in other words, they had a role in making it happen. The following sections explore these three concepts in more detail, as applicable to other rides in Krasniashchikh's amusement park.

The Charon hypothesis

Before we delve into a closer examination of the three indicators of a psychopomp, the presence of the historical past in texts under analysis should be reemphasized. Literary scholars have connected this presence to the emergence of supernatural guides. Analyzing a number of recent Russian novels in his exploration of a phenomenon he terms “magical historicism,” for instance, Alexander Etkind asserts that as long as the current leadership of the country fails to work through its complicated and, at times, terrifying past, “the struggling civil society and the intrepid reading public” will remain “possessed by the unquiet ghosts of the Soviet era.” In contemporary Russian literature, which is highly focused on history and its discontents, this is reflected in a variety of monsters, mutated humans, and magic: “The uncanny scenery of post-Soviet literature signals the failure of other, more conventional ways of understanding social reality.”¹⁸ Recall Lipovetsky's assertion that the dreams and secrets of the collapsed country breed new hybrid phantoms with particular intensity these days.¹⁹ And Zhadan observes specifically with regard to Kharkiv: “Literature is

¹⁸ Etkind, “Stories of the Undead,” 633, 657.

¹⁹ Lipovetsky, *Paralogii*, 408.

the ghosts you sense when you walk into a dark room. In the case of Kharkiv's literature, ghosts are particularly plentiful."²⁰

A distinct kind of phantom emerges on this eerie scene as a literary actor: psychopomps, creatures responsible for escorting souls into the afterlife. A mediator between the conscious and unconscious realms in Jungian psychology, the psychopomp is found in many religions around the world. His or her ultimate purpose is to ensure a safe passage. Charon, the ferryman of Hades, is one such mediator. It is with the help of his kin that the characters in *Park* travel through time and realities. These otherworldly contacts with helper spirits are a distinctive feature of Krasniashchikh's work. The following sections explore the characteristics of assisted supernatural border crossings.

Boundaries

Kharkiv's contemporary texts, of which *Park* is an example, feature a zone of indistinction between the living and the dead, adding an extra layer of mystification to an already uncanny literary landscape. Recall, for instance, the football match in *Voroshylivhrad*. Another boundary, that of victimhood and perpetration, is also smudged by Krasniashchikh (and by other doubletake writers, as the next chapter demonstrates). Interestingly, it has been argued that interchangeable victim-perpetrator status formed one of the pillars on which the Soviet terror relied. In contrast to the terror conducted by Nazi Germany, this argument submits, no predefined group of people was targeted in the Soviet Union. Anyone could fall prey to the system, including the executioners themselves.²¹

Moving on through *Park*, a reader comes across another ride, "Amerikanskie gorki" (American rollercoaster). Its protagonist, Sergeï,

²⁰ Zhadan, "Vykhid," in *Potiah*, 41.

²¹ "Soviet repressions differed from Nazi German exterminations, in which the victims and perpetrators were distanced by crystal-clear constructions" (Etkind, "Stories of the Undead," 634). See also *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)—particularly "Part II: Violence"—as well as Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (London: Penguin, 2005), esp. chapters 5 and 14.

finds himself trapped in a cycle of murders, where each person receives paranormal orders to kill someone, only to become next on the endless hit list. Sergeï articulates it the following way:

This devil's wheel cannot be stopped until we cease taking turns killing each other. You see, the murderer automatically becomes a victim. It's a closed circle. It's a hellish ride. It's the law. Perhaps there are thousands of ways for the dead to enter our world; I know of only one.²²

Like in the Soviet Union, and like in "The main entrance" (where all pensioners and even the prosecutor were implicated in A. P. Charon's scheme), no one stays untouched by the reigning system of order. The story's plot focuses on today's murderers who become tomorrow's victims, as decreed by a force the author does not even attempt to demystify—an unspeakable Z, if we were to add to Anton's insufferable X and Y.

At the end of "American rollercoaster," its protagonist, Sergeï, attempts to break this vicious cycle by calling on the supernatural power that dispenses execution requests. He reaches it by slitting his veins, and, when a voice finally answers him, he transmits the next hit order to himself, targeting himself ("Adresat?"—Sergeï nazvalsia.—"Ob'ekt?"—Sergeï nazvalsia."²³). By committing suicide he hopes to stall the lethal rotation, but we never learn whether he succeeds; the story ends here. It is important to note, however, that his preparations for death take the form of packing for a journey: "Don't forget: toothbrush, shaving cream, towel. Everything that might come in handy on the road and at a new place." As he prepares a list of things to take, he includes memory: "Cigarettes—to smoke. A sweater—to wear. Memory—to remember."²⁴

Contemplating "the perfect optionality of our universe," Sergeï wonders whether we are "living in this world or beyond it—somewhere on the outskirts of all that happens."²⁵ This possibility of existence on

²² Krasniashchikh, "Amerikanskije gorki," in *Park*, 166.

²³ Krasniashchikh, "Amerikanskije gorki," 168.

²⁴ Krasniashchikh, "Amerikanskije gorki," 167.

²⁵ Krasniashchikh, "Amerikanskije gorki," 158.

either side of a border—inside and outside our world, sometimes even simultaneously—is characteristic of Krasniashchikh's entire collection. It is one of the traits he has in common with Zhadan. For instance, borders are crossed yet again in "Karusel'" (The carousel) when the deceased narrator comes back to visit those he had loved. He starts the story by asking: "Did you know that all people become gods after death? Neither did I, until I died."²⁶ Meanwhile, in "Illuzion" (The illusion ride), the protagonist insists that one football team won an important match, while the entire city celebrates the victory of another. An attentive reader might later identify his obstinacy as a conscious but failed attempt to lose his sanity following a traumatic event. As we learned earlier from Anton's experience, rewriting storylines of reality—and possibly losing one's mind in the process—is one of the surest ways to ease the pain of doubt and regret. If one succeeds, "not a single star will pass him by anymore, like it did before, to fall beyond the frontiers of madness."²⁷

Another boundary, one between reality and imagination, is traversed by a father and his young son in "Igroye avtomaty" (The arcade games), possibly with lethal results for one or both of them. Here, too, memory plays a role. Having taken his son swimming, the father is struck by a sudden, debilitating flashback to an abusive situation he experienced as a child. Far from the shore he offers the exhausted, whimpering boy a choice of two symbolic props to aid a return to safety: a key (which symbolizes opening a door and running away) or a knife (which symbolizes attacking the source of danger). As the panicked youngster pulls himself together and picks the knife ("I'm a beast, but I won, daddy. You lost."²⁸), the drowning man is tormented by his inability to recall what he had chosen when he faced his own abusive father as a child.

The frontier of reality and imagination is one of the most visited zones of indistinction in Kharkiv's doubletake texts. The short story "Snegomash" (2009) by Anton Erkhov (b. 1978), for example, also addresses and challenges the boundary between truth and fiction. Written in the familiar form of relatively polished linear first-person

²⁶ Krasniashchikh, "Karusel'," in *Park*, 29.

²⁷ Krasniashchikh, "Amerikanske gorki," 159.

²⁸ Krasniashchikh, "Igroye avtomaty," in *Park*, 71.

narrative, “Snegomash” is punctuated by italicized pieces of disconnected prose, presumably either read or written by the protagonist in the process of narration. This protagonist, who sells DVDs for a living and spends his time reading books, observes that characters entering his life are related to the fiction he reads. A young woman he dubs Sabrina visits his shop regularly while he works through *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for instance, and vanishes when he is finished. A small private entrepreneur whose stall in a supermarket is surrounded by large marketing signs, he trusts his imagination more than the artificial, consumer-oriented façade of his reality.

It is unclear, however, whether the characters he links to each book are indeed mystically connected to it—it is also possible that he picks them out among the visitors and molds them according to impressions from each text. This subjectivity, or even potential authorship, is reminiscent of Anton’s dilemma with naming the undead. It is eloquently reflected in the narrator’s casual conclusion as he observes a pair of kids: “They’re fifteen, and this means they live in 1993.”²⁹ Fifteen is the age Erkhov himself would have been in 1993. This assumption serves to highlight the inseparability of one’s experience from one’s perception of the world. Though an exaggeration, it points to the central role of memory in the ways we choose to process things.

Memory frequently surfaces throughout “Snegomash,” each time in fragments and flashes. A package of milk falls in the shop and becomes a picture from a Soviet magazine: “splashes of milk turn into stars and planets.” Words like *detstvo*, *makulatura*, *antresoli* find their way into an otherwise unrelated account through pure association. A contemporary world map looks just like the one from childhood—except there were “slightly fewer countries” back then. Elsewhere, films from one’s youth emerge: “ten or twenty kopeks per showing.”³⁰ In light of the all-pervasive character of recollections in this story, the narrative’s twist is based on a discussion involving clones.³¹ The narrator believes that clones always remain identical, because they share “mem-

²⁹ Anton Erkhov, “Snegomash,” *Soiuz Pisatelei* 12 (2010): 282.

³⁰ Erkhov, “Snegomash,” 285.

³¹ It is unlikely that Erkhov seeks to draw any cinematographic links here, but Ilya Khrzhanovsky’s film *4* (2004), which follows the abstruse story of four cloned sisters, is a possible parallel.

ories, fears and desires,” while his friend spells out a disagreement: the clones are bound to be affected by “cir-cum-stan-ces” that will render them different sooner or later. At the end, the narrator comes upon a man who has collapsed on the street, and who looks exactly like him.

The vagueness of the nature of events presented to the reader in such fiction is arguably summarized in Krasniashchikh’s “Chërtovo koleso (Koleso obozreniia)” (The Ferris wheel), when the protagonist observes:

Everything is doubled. One side can be remembered and recognized; the other—what I see now—is unfamiliar. . . . Old things and new ones don’t get in each other’s way, but neither do they help each other; they are simply together.³²

This is not the only explicit reference in *Park* to a possible coexistence of different (or even opposite) entities. When the elderly character of another amusement ride, “Labirint” (The labyrinth), makes a decision in 1945 to live under communism forever, he ends up wandering through an inner realm where nonexistence and being are comfortably intertwined. They “even live within each other”³³—a reference to the scarcity of distinctions between the past and the present, confirming that the focus on historical memory is “a characteristic trait of the postrevolutionary, post-traumatic time.”³⁴

In this setting, authors may turn to paranormal presences, the psychopomps, to guide their characters in the maze of dealing with the past. If one can employ supernatural helpers, one will do it sooner or later. A. P. Charon is one of the ferrymen who inhabit contemporary Kharkiv literature and help recover its characters from the whirlpools of postcatastrophic scenery. Granted, the original Charon

³² Krasniashchikh, “Chërtovo koleso (Koleso obozreniia),” in *Park*, 58. In his study of the postcolonial perspective on Ukrainian literature, Myroslav Shkandrij notes a similar inclination in texts by the older generation of writers: “the local can coexist with the universal, and the imaginary with the real” (Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine*, 267).

³³ Krasniashchikh, “Labirint,” in *Park*, 22.

³⁴ Alexander Etkind, “Vremia sravniat’ kamni. Postrevoliutsionnaia kul’tura politicheskoi skorbi v sovremennoi Rossii,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2004): 35.

ferried people primarily in the direction of death, with a few well-known exceptions.³⁵ His name, in fact, may be a euphemism for death itself. But for the real-life shamans who fulfill such functions in our world, just like for A. P. Charon, tasks are often bilateral. Researchers report that human shamans not only accompany the souls of the dead to safety, but also assist at birth, introducing newborn souls into the world.³⁶ Indeed, as Anton (or Egor Valentinovich?) had discovered, when all boundaries lie “beyond arithmetics” and are “blurred,” they become crossable in both directions.

Returning to “The main entrance” after this brief walk around the otherworldly park, the visitor may register that everything is indeed doubled—whether as past and present, or as life and afterlife. Here, too, two characters specialize in death. Anton’s profession is to bring quick demise; Charon works slowly. “Death in general is quite a long process, far from immediate; it takes a while,” explains Krasniashchikh when asked about this story.³⁷ When one executioner learns about the other’s extraordinary skills, it is not just the mastery that catches his attention; it is also the fact that “the mad boatman” is able to work backward, resurrecting those he touches—such is Krasniashchikh’s own take on “The main entrance.” And this ability could well be the unknown that caused Anton so much discomfort. An executioner’s worldview could not accommodate a function that includes (re)giving life—a skill beyond his reach. This brings us to the next section: the reversibility of time as one of the signs that a psychopomp is in action.

Time

The Charon hypothesis does not rely solely on creatures being able to cross into Hades and back. Another variable must be observed as fluctuating, and that variable is the flow of time. While characters may

³⁵ See entry on *χάρων* in Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 1981; entry on “Charon” in N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 228.

³⁶ Mihály Hoppál, *Sámánok Euráziában* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2005), 36.

³⁷ Andrei Krasniashchikh, interview by the author, April 21, 2012.

travel back on their own (in dreams, for instance) in order to make sense of trauma, psychopomps are needed to bring one forward again, lest one stays back forever—drowning in the temporal swamps, like the main character in Dmitrii Bykov's *Opravdanie* (Justification, 2001). When time stops and then rolls backward for the feverish Anton in a nameless hotel, his past does not simply get erased; it is subsequently rewritten. Instead of serving as the final destination, death is cast as a journey, a mode of transit (see chapter 5), a process of becoming. It is a remaking of the human being, rather than a demise. Time hiccups as Anton dies and starts “living backward.” Eventually he stops rewinding, having achieved full erasure of memory, and goes forward into old age as a different person.³⁸

The phenomenon of double reversal of time (back, then forward again) is examined in more detail in “Podvesnaia doroga” (The cableway). Its main character is a provincial actress, Mashen'ka, who specializes in playing corpses. The story centers on her boarding a train for Leningrad to play a dead Ophelia (as usual, someone else will play the living one). However, strange things begin to happen as this train rolls into the night.³⁹ People slowly vanish from its compartments, and Mashen'ka soon discovers that each wagon travels in the opposite direction when compared to the previous one. Walking through them all—one going forward, another riding back—she finally reaches the restaurant car. There, the lovers she had known, all dead, have gathered for a night of recollection. She never figures out in which direction this most important “first-last” railcar is rolling—“correctly or incorrectly.” Meanwhile, the reader never quite figures out whether Mashen'ka is alive or, like the others, is journeying to the other side.

As an example of post-traumatic imaginative writing, “The cableway” leaves it unclear whose death is being documented. But as the

³⁸ The fact that Egor Valentinovich is nevertheless later jailed for Anton's killings raises a whole set of interesting questions: Was the identity conversion real, or, rather, internal, true to the blurring of relevant boundaries and reference points in this story? Is it realistic to ever leave anything behind? Can one escape retribution? How feasible is retribution in situations of blurred boundaries or general participation (such as all pensioners being implicated in Charon's scheme)?

³⁹ Compare to the significance of trains as temporal travelers in Zhadan's prose (particularly in *Voroshylivhrad* and in *Anarchy in the UKR*).

men tell their stories of love and demise and say their final farewells to Mashen'ka, it becomes apparent that the role she plays for them is more powerful than her initial meekness might have suggested. Either she is a psychopomp to the gathered deceased, accompanying them on this most important journey of all, or—in a characteristic overlap of boundaries—they are the ones who help her cross, possibly redeeming themselves in the process. Her job as a trained corpse performer is not an accidental detail. All those assembled in the restaurant car have a death to regret; more often than not, the death is their own. Psychopomps are particularly versatile in stories centered around regret and mourning.

“Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all,” observes Judith Butler.⁴⁰ The restaurant car of Mashen'ka's ghost train is a fit setting for this traumatized we-ing. “We are all Hamlets here,” notes one of the men, explaining:

We've tripped, we're falling . . . , blaming everyone, including ourselves, for ending up in this situation—or should I call it condition?—but most of all, blaming our Ophelia. . . . each in his own thoughts, we all reach out and grab her, Ophelia, our Ophelia, who we hope can still save us.⁴¹

All kinds of emotional reactions to losing life can be observed among the men in the course of that night: denial, anger, nostalgia, regret, fear

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4 (2003): 10.

⁴¹ Krasniashchikh, “Podvesnaia doroga,” in *Park*, 126. The significance of Hamlet here lies in his search for the truth. In a political interpretation of Grigoriï Kozintsev's celebrated film *Hamlet* (1964), the ghost of Hamlet's father speaks “the truth that every son of a catastrophe wants to learn about his perished father—and ideally—from him” (Alexander Etkind, “Mourning the Soviet Victims in a Cosmopolitan Way: Hamlet from Kozintsev to Riazanov,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 5 [2011]: 389). The importance of truth in *Hamlet* was addressed by the director himself: “The ghost reveals to Hamlet the truth about life, as if lifting a curtain . . . , and everything becomes clearly visible” (Grigoriï Kozintsev, *Vremia tragedii* [Moscow: Vagrius, 2004], 205). Among the specters emerging in post-Soviet imaginations in response to the unburied past, the truth-wielding ancestor is a particularly important visitor.

(“fear without words, without a name, size or shape, fear of fears”⁴²), as well as acceptance and coming to terms. Mashen’ka, the “authorized representative of the other world in this one,”⁴³ carries them through all anguish. In the morning, the ghosts tell her not to worry about them any longer, and send her back into the repopulated, perfectly normal train. It arrives to Leningrad as planned.

Mashen’ka’s long—until dawn—meeting with death highlights, once more, the gradualness of the process of dying. One of the men contemplates:

You might not even notice the actual moment. . . . It’s not even a change, not a displacement of one thing with another. . . . Everyone talks about the beginning, or the apex, or the resolution. But after everything goes, after everything ends, something else begins, something absolutely and totally different, and what came before isn’t alien to this new thing; on the contrary, it is organically its own.⁴⁴

As if in response to this passage, Butler questions Freud’s early (1917) belief that “successful mourning meant being able to exchange one object for another.” She suggests that instead, “perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation.”⁴⁵ From this point of view, the bilateral movement of literary time may secure the transformative effect of loss. This effect has an important function: through rewriting, the mourner gets a chance to (re)claim responsibility for the inner changes he or she elects to agree to, or else choose different ones altogether. Anton’s “modeling his past differently” is an example of this. Agency renders loss intelligible.

The time-related notion of remodeling and rewriting one’s past, the way we tend to think of shaping the future, is a significant one. In Krasniashchikh’s texts, it takes the form of the introduction of choice into an otherwise overpowering situation—a repossession of oneself despite turmoil. The themes of writing, of authoring, and thus of

⁴² Krasniashchikh, “Podvesnaia doroga,” 128.

⁴³ Krasniashchikh, “Podvesnaia doroga,” 105.

⁴⁴ Krasniashchikh, “Podvesnaia doroga,” 118–19.

⁴⁵ Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 11.

claiming agency, are among the top motifs here. The third sign of the applicability of the Charon hypothesis to a given text—the final major clue to search the narrative for a psychopomp, either an open one (like A. P. Charon) or a veiled one (like Mashen'ka)—is the repetitive surfacing and negotiation of responsibility, which the characters are obsessively intent on either rejecting or claiming.

Agency

The prose under study often ties the effort to negotiate personal responsibility to a protagonist's painful lack of a coherent, whole self, which could be interpreted as his or her lack of sanity. This sickness of the soul (*dushevnaia bolezn'*) causes a large part of the pain such characters feel. In her discussion of Aleksandr Morfov's adaptation of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Rebecca Reich argues that "[Morfov's] emphasis on the soul references the medieval perception of madness as a state of heightened spirituality, moving away from the clinical imagery that dominated late Soviet literature on madness."⁴⁶ Similarly, Krasniashchikh foregrounds this "heightened spirituality" in much of the turmoil affecting his characters, who search stubbornly for their role in events that remain incomprehensible to them.

"I don't know how to want on my own. God wants for me, but I wanted to want everything myself," professes the troubled narrator of "Russkie gorki" (Russian rollercoaster).⁴⁷ Part of his struggle with

⁴⁶ Rebecca Reich, "Thinking Differently: Psychiatry, Literature and Dissent in the Late Soviet Period" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010), 11.

⁴⁷ Krasniashchikh, "Russkie gorki," in *Park*, 12. This story has a curious background: it comes with two different endings, which strongly affect it. In the English translation, the narrator's rambling acquires an alarming backdrop in the concluding paragraph: "And then we walked a lot, and we spoke good words about God, so he would know. And we didn't rob the stalls, and I never promised to burn down the church, and about the president, that's all not true. I just fed them. They always wanted to eat. Don't beat me anymore. I won't tell anyone about God anymore. I'll just stay like this" (Andreĭ Krasniashchikh, "Russian Roller-Coaster," trans. Tanya Paperny, *VICE Reader*, August 29, 2013, <http://www.vice.com/read/russian-roller-coaster>). In the Russian version as published in *Park*, the narrative and its circumstances remain more abstract by ending simply with "And then we walked a lot."

a mental illness is rooted in figuring out who is responsible for every move he makes. "Now everything is different, everything depends not on me, but on someone else," fears the narrator of "Lodochki" (The swings) before succumbing to delirium.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, "Kino i nemtsy" (Cinema and the Germans) takes place at a conference that goes out of control as people—first children, then adults—begin to confess their sins in what the narrator calls "a day of fury," hurrying to repent before the time for this opportunity runs out.⁴⁹ Witnessing this explosion of mass psychosis in what appears to be genuine surprise are the twelve apostles of death—this is how the narrator refers to the conference speakers.

This remarkable need to put one's name on one's actions, whether good or bad, was also the force behind Anton's first step towards trying to solve the mystery of the resurrected corpses. Before embarking on a search for an explanation, he makes a point of separating those he had killed from those whose death took place beyond his reach.⁵⁰ The latter are of no interest to him; the former cost him his mind. Kurkov's obituary-wielding protagonist in *Smert' postoronnego*, Viktor, endorses this distinction as he contemplates his strange job: the deaths connected to his obituaries were merely "someone else's evil, to which he ascribed philosophical meaning for three hundred dollars a month. He was an indirect presence in this evil, an unimportant one."⁵¹ This negotiation brings Viktor peace, which Anton loses along with inner stability.

In fact, the storylines of Krasniashchikh's collection consistently conflate the struggles of agency with the turmoil of madness. The principal handling of responsibility in this context takes place in the final story, presented outside of the main collections of *Park*. "Smorodinovyĭ bes" (The currant demon) consists of a set of testimonies of witnesses to an inexplicable crime. On the last page of the book, the final speaker attempts to calm an invisible addressee:

To me it also sometimes looks as if we're the ones who killed them. But overall, in the metaphysical sense, so to speak, we are not guilty. I mean, we're guilty, of course, but as a last resort, in

⁴⁸ Krasniashchikh, "Lodochki," in *Park*, 131.

⁴⁹ Krasniashchikh, "Kino i nemtsy," in *Park*, 208.

⁵⁰ Krasniashchikh, "Glavnyi vkhod," 95.

⁵¹ Kurkov, *Smert' postoronnego*, 168.

a way. It decreases: the first guilty one is god, naturally, because he made you this way; then the currant demon, then all of us . . . , and only then—you. You weren't even in the apartment at that time. Anyway, stop digging in the past: everyone has already forgotten about it.⁵²

This attempt to categorize variations of responsibility and blame appears to be an inverted echo of Karl Jaspers's contemplations on the question of German guilt.⁵³ However, this echo is (almost) playful. When asked to demystify a certain Plan B, which is mentioned in the story several times without an explanation, Krasniashchikh muses:

Everyone has a role [in this story]; someone even gets to play the demon. And we—the readers—want to believe them, to believe what we read, to perceive it as real. So for them Plan B entails returning from a game situation to reality, which does not exist for them. While for us it entails trying to imagine everything purely as play, without a realistic context. An unattainable task—both for us and for them.⁵⁴

Hence, the author sets up a situation in which some act (narrate), others watch (read), and their mutual goal is to conceptualize (believe in) each other's realities. A key to tackling this unattainable task may be found in the book's preface, which offers a selection of possible routes through the rides in the amusement park. Krasniashchikh adds that he compiled these alternatives for the reader because "clearly, the park where your parents take you is not the same as the one you visit with young ladies, or the one where you bring your son. This must be considered."⁵⁵ Recall Zhadan's take on the interactive engagement of the individual with a surrounding territory, "changing it and changing together with it."

⁵² Andrei Krasniashchikh, "Smorodinovyĭ bes," in *Park*, 219.

⁵³ Karl Jaspers, "The Question of German Guilt," in *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings, Selections*, ed. and trans. Edith Ehrlich, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 397–408.

⁵⁴ Andrei Krasniashchikh, interview by the author, April 16, 2012.

⁵⁵ Krasniashchikh, "Rekomendatsii dlia otdykhaiushchikh," in *Park*, 6.

This means, essentially, a gradual unveiling of layers in a given place in accordance with the flow of time, where each layer—each reality—is true in its own temporal frames. The notion in question is *alêtheia*—an ontological conception of truth as historically variable unconcealment. This idea, favored by Martin Heidegger, represents an “essential strife” between two interconnected “dimensions of intelligibility (namely, revealing and concealing) that Heidegger calls ‘world’ and ‘earth.’”⁵⁶ In this light the psychopomps, as boatmen between worlds, are also guides between realities.

Employed in ancient Greece to tackle the otherwise incomprehensible process of crossing from one world to another, psychopomps return to modern Ukraine to engage in a similar task: to render the change of worlds that took place there in recent decades slightly less overwhelming. And because the handling of the severe twentieth century involves negotiating the choices made by those who lived at that time—linking human loss to protecting one’s nation, for instance—the frontiers of agency become one of the most important terrains to plot through this literature. The more preoccupied the characters seem with claiming, reclaiming, or rejecting responsibility for past events in a narrative, the more likely it is that they are traversing realities in a mournful search for truth. Mythological helpers may be in waiting.

This search for truth, as an effort to (re)narrate the past, forms yet another link to memory, whose importance in the arena of agency can be illuminated by an ancient pair of mythological rivers: Lethe and Mnemosyne. The better-known one, Lethe, one of the five main rivers of Hades, flows through the Underworld, where all who drink from it experience complete forgetfulness. Ovid notes that it passes through the cave of Hypnos, god of sleep.⁵⁷ In Classical Greek, its name means “oblivion.” A common assumption is that the newly deceased had to drink from Lethe before entering the world of the dead. At the same time, some ancient Greeks believed that souls had to drink from its

⁵⁶ Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 44.

⁵⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.592 ff., trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 267.

waters before being reincarnated (a reminder of bilateral border crossings).⁵⁸ In either direction, then, this river erases memory.

However, several enigmatic cults, reserved only for the initiated, spoke of the existence of another river, Mnemosyne. Those who drank from Mnemosyne remembered everything, attaining omniscience. The followers of these cults believed that there is a choice of rivers to drink from after death. In a tribute to both agency and memory even in the realm of the underworld, they prepared to choose Mnemosyne instead of Lethe when the time comes.⁵⁹

The mourning writer

In “American rollercoaster,” Sergei—the character who attempts to break the cycle of deaths by locking it upon himself—puts memory on his packing list in preparation for suicide. Why does it appear as something that can be packed, something tangible, like cigarettes or a sweater? The reason is that memory, as we have seen, can be lost. The writers discussed in this book, including Krasniashchikh, continually weave it into their narratives as both a place where one can go, and a thing that one can forfeit.

“One mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever,” writes Butler.⁶⁰ The notion of processing change relies on some measure of recollection of one’s previous state. In an interpretation that is hardly new, this renders memory essential to mourning—which is a process of movement, of coming to accept a change, to use the notion Butler suggests. Accepting a change, or at least putting effort into making it comprehensible, is a way of making it less overwhelming.

⁵⁸ Virgil wrote in *Aeneid* 6.713 ff. that the dead may be reincarnated only after they have had their memories erased by the Lethe (Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Cecil Day Lewis [London: Hogarth Press, 1952], 705).

⁵⁹ “And the initiate is warned of the former [Lethe] and directed toward the latter [Mnemosyne]” (Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972], 213).

⁶⁰ Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 11.

A number of Krasniashchikh's characters are united by their efforts at making change comprehensible. The elderly character of "The labyrinth," mentioned earlier, retreats into a private inner maze from which there is no exit. He has a reason to do so: he longs to find and meet his absent father, "to question him."⁶¹ In Anton's case, Krasniashchikh's emphasis on his inability to fix his father's beads is not accidental: it is the last thing Anton holds before he dies. In these and other examples, memory in the shape of fathers is sought after—and mourned—by characters looking for answers. This memory forms an intimate part of them; in "American rollercoaster," Sergeĭ explains that the otherworldly orders to kill others, once received, are impossible to resist because "they work on the subconscious, on one's most beloved memories."⁶² The arrested pensioners at the end of "The main entrance" lose their minds when they can no longer recall their identities. And one of the most distressed monologues in the book belongs to a character who cannot remember: "How old am I: seventy or seven,—and where is the emptiness: behind me or ahead of me? Why can't memory cross the boundary of childhood? Where am I?"⁶³

Standing tall among these mournful answer-seekers is the writer him- or herself, the most important psychopomp inhabiting the pathway between "dimensions of intelligibility" (to use Heidegger's framework). He or she must be able and willing to "go back to the very beginnings, seek out—not even the roots—the mere seeds of intermingling, and cleanse them from the strata of time."⁶⁴ Indeed, Heidegger, a believer in ontological historicity, emphasized that "art is the becoming and happening of truth."⁶⁵ In *Park*, the artist reveals himself and speaks up among the witness testimonies of the final story, "The currant demon": "I am the author, my name is Andreĭ Petrovich Krasniashchikh. I am training in discursive practice."⁶⁶ His given name and patronymic are identical to those of A. P. Charon.

⁶¹ Krasniashchikh, "Labirint," 23.

⁶² Krasniashchikh, "Amerikanskĭe gorki," 166.

⁶³ Krasniashchikh, "Chĕrtovo koleso (Koleso obozreniia)," 60.

⁶⁴ Krasniashchikh, "Teogonivo," in *Park*, 197.

⁶⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 71.

⁶⁶ Krasniashchikh, "Smorodinovyĭ bes," 215.

The Soviet writer might have been “a snake charmer, a magician who mesmerizes the public because, if he fails to do so, the public will beat him to death.”⁶⁷ The post-Soviet writer has to be a ghost-whisperer. If through his art he cannot plot a course among the specters of his land, they might overpower him. Anton was “decisively convinced of the artificiality of any parallels between literature and death.”⁶⁸ This conviction preceded his demise, which may constitute a warning to the readers against making a similar error of judgment. Literature, death, and memory are tightly linked in a place where boundaries, time, and agency intertwine—a place where “everything is legitimized and justified by yesterday: a day that never existed, a day that is never like today, a day that brings new death like birth.”⁶⁹ In a mournful contemplation of Kharkiv’s historic Slovo building, where victims of the Executed Renaissance lived until the 1930s, Zhadan speaks of death beginning where literature ends.⁷⁰

Living and working on the unquiet border between nations, today’s Kharkiv writers might be among the most skilled guides to choosing Mnemosyne when the alternatives are offered. It is what the presbyter in *Voroshylivhrad* had advised Herman to do, after all. Zhadan’s memory-emptiness dichotomy resurfaces in *Park*: Anton’s death is described as “the end of all questions.” It leads to a loss of self, because he forgoes memory until the moment he receives his father’s bead. His story confirms Afanas’eva’s warning: you must remember continuously, lest “one minute, suddenly, you’ll recall everything, take a thousand missed breaths at once, and . . .” Following writers across these margins of life and death, and watching their fictional ferrymen do the same, might not end all questions for readers concerned with memory and trauma in the post-Soviet world. But it could help them stay afloat.



Krasniashchikh’s stories are equipped to handle difficult pasts by using soul guides to warp boundaries and time, thereby facilitating healing—or at least offering it as an option, for those able to handle such

⁶⁷ Etkind, “Stories of the Undead,” 650.

⁶⁸ Krasniashchikh, “Glavnyi vkhod,” 100.

⁶⁹ Krasniashchikh, “Amerikanskii gorki,” 158.

⁷⁰ Zhadan, “Kinets’ ukrains’koi sylabo-toniky,” in *Ballady*.

responsibility. Sergei's challenge to the ceaseless rotation of deaths in "American rollercoaster" combines all three variables of the Charon hypothesis—boundaries, time and agency: he melts a crystallized, frozen piece of time, and uses a razor to mix his own blood with the liquid. But first he remembers to pack memory for the voyage ahead. The introduction of this choice into a seemingly preordained ancient trajectory of death-forgetting-eternity assumes that deviating from this trajectory entails effort, and therefore might require help (the cults' followers had to be taught to opt for Mnemosyne). Today's underworld poses a difficulty in separating the living from the dead, because its boundaries are porous, and creatures can slip through in both directions. This adds uncertainty to the already haunting overlap between victims and executioners. Soul-guides have appeared in literature that deals with these complexities as a reflection of the living beings' attempts to navigate the aftermath of catastrophes.

To render the Charon hypothesis true, boundaries portrayed in a story must be fluid, time—reversible, and agency—claimable. Everything else can remain as hazy as the author wills it to be. "To be honest, I never formulated Plan B to myself," explains A. P. Krasniashchikh in reference to "The currant demon" when questioned about it. "The task of the text is to remain always unexpressed—to be present in absentia."⁷¹ Preserving this nonexpression can help readers enter the narrative and remodel it as needed—thus agreeing to be as transformed as they seek to be. The task of believing the characters' reality, which Krasniashchikh described earlier as unattainable, appears to be a matter of effort.

If that does not work, however, the writer would probably remind us that there is always a Plan B.

⁷¹ Andrei Krasniashchikh, interview by the author, April 16, 2012.

Chapter Four

FRONTIERS OF TRAUMA*

One cannot prove anything. One can only show it. One can only flame up with it. One can only believe it. One can only be forced to believe it.

—Yuri Tsaplin (1997)

One wintry night, walking home from a knight-themed party, three merry young men with swords come across a white statue in a cold dark park. They dare each other to behead it, and after much effort, on the fifth blow, one succeeds. As his drunken friends celebrate the statue's demise, the decapitator suddenly falls to his knees, vomiting violently. The dotingly picturesque description of this abrupt physical reaction, along with its sound effects ("He gagged, then rattled, and snowflakes melted in his hoarse breath"), constitutes the most vivid part of a tiny, 150-word story "Briug" (1996) by Kharkiv writer Yuri Tsaplin (b. Volokhov, 1972).¹ Its close but decontextualized snapshots of distress, such as snow vanishing in the nausea-infused breath of the statue's exe-

* An earlier version of this chapter was published as Tanya Zaharchenko, "Thesaurus of the Unspeakable: *Thanatopraxis* in Kharkiv's Tales of Trauma," *Modern Language Review* 109 (2014): 462–81.

¹ Tsaplin, "Briug," in *Malen'kiĭ*, 57. The curious parallel to Don Giovanni's fate—a man brought down by a statue for his violence—is obscured here by the explicit, real-life details of physical sickness.

cutioner, are an example of an intriguing trend discussed in this chapter as another kind of navigation technique for plotting blurred boundaries.

This trend, which I call *thanatopraxis*, consists of detailed but fragmentary references to violence that explicitly lacks any definitive explanation or setting. “Briug” tells us about the attributes of the asphalt below our perpetrator, for instance, but mentions nothing of the streets surrounding this scene. It also steers clear of omniscient third person glances at internal monologues. Rather, it works like a selective and externally narrated cinematic shot. This storytelling technique utilizes a combination of two approaches: a heightened degree of descriptive focus on a microcosmic level, and a general incomprehensibility of narrative on a macrocosmic level. Mingling tormented bodies with chopped texts, this metonymic necrorealism² engages with the concepts of suffering and death in concentrated ways that render trauma more approachable: one disembodied dose of horror at a time. This chapter proposes an analysis of this curious literary technique, and links it to Ukraine’s complicated recent past.

“The subconscious of the last Soviet generation preserves the dreams and secrets” of the collapsed country, writes Mark Lipovetsky, adding that on the brink of epochs it produces new hybrid phantoms with particular intensity.³ Let us take a look at some of these phantoms, as found in Kharkiv’s imaginative writing. They come from three short stories, all fragmented, with little apparent plot and startling—or absent—endings. We have already mentioned Tsaplin, the author of “Briug”; his “Dukh vmesto cheloveka” (Spirit instead of human, 1995) is a nameless narrator’s rambling account about vile spirits who brutally attack his friend. Andreï Krasniashchikh’s “Smorodinovyĭ bes” (The currant demon, 2003; see chapter 3) consists of a collection of similarly enigmatic references to a crime that is never fully revealed. All we know is that it involves an alleged slaughter of children. Finally,

² Necrorealism was a movement that arose in Leningrad in the early 1980s as a reaction to the ideological aspect of Soviet life. Necrorealists dealt closely with death, its symbols, and its processes. For an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon, see Alexei Yurchak, “Necro-Utopia: The Politics of Indistinction and the Aesthetics of the Non-Soviet,” *Current Anthropology* 49 (2008): 199–224.

³ Lipovetsky, *Paralogii*, 408.

Oleh Kotsarev's "Depo na Lybids'kiï" (The Lybids'ka depot, 2008) is a tale about a remorseful ghost that haunts a former tram depot, until his chance encounter with one post-Soviet woman changes everything.

In contrast to the trauma-oriented texts of the previous generation of Ukrainian writers—such as Yuri Andrukhovych, Yuri Gudz', Yuri Izdryk, Oksana Zabuzhko—the dizzying dashcam action of the doubletake writers' narration aims to expose and explore how pain feels, rather than to address or uncover the truth and meaning behind it. These three authors—Tsaplin, Krasniashchikh, and Kotsarev—were children when Vasyl Stus, a Ukrainian dissident poet, declared a hunger strike and died in a labor camp for political prisoners in 1985. Their stories do some similar things in two languages, Ukrainian and Russian: they urge the reader to dive into, and perhaps even to own, the symptoms of distress they portray, while problematizing any conclusion one might try to take away. This is a way for the current generation to assert its right of impact (that is, a right to be affected) by the historical ordeal usually claimed by its predecessors.

In another short story by Tsaplin, "Kleiï" (Glue, 1996), an old grandfather urges his adult grandson to put a shattered vase back together. The grandson broke it when he was only two years old, but its pieces had been carefully preserved. "Do you honestly think I can fix this vase?" asks the young man respectfully after some time. And the elderly man responds crossly: "Just keep gluing" (*A ty kleï. Ty kleï*).⁴ Time has not calmed his frustration about this loss (the toy that hit the vase remains "idiotic" despite the cushion of years). For retribution or for consolation, the grandfather expects some effort from his grandson to put things right, regardless of whether or not it is a realistic undertaking.

Such expectations are acutely familiar to many representatives of the first post-Soviet generation. To reflect this struggle, until the fallen empire and its postcollapse shrapnel of the 1990s are laid to rest—names verbalized, monuments built, dark spots illuminated, institutions restructured, and fragments of the broken vase finally filed away—writers will continue to serve us up with bizarrely assembled

⁴ Tsaplin, "Kleiï," in *Malen'kiï*, 15. In a rare case of grammatical concurrence between English and Russian, *kleï* is a noun for glue as well as an imperative form of the corresponding verb.

pieces of a shattered whole: *A ty kleĩ. Ty kleĩ*. This chapter examines the expression that this general framework finds in doubletake fiction.

Expressing the unspeakable

Vitaly Chernetsky describes Zhadan's novel *Depeche Mode* as "endowing with a voice a previously unrepresented identity," referring to east Ukrainian urban youth.⁵ This potent voice could be approached as a combination of many intonations: young, bilingual, thoughtful, searching, and often slightly ironic. Despite the natural variations within these intonations, however, they share some main themes, as discussed in this book. One such theme marries detailed depictions of bodily harm to the general opaqueness of its circumstances, both amplified to the point that helps render horrific events fairly mundane.

This literary device can be termed *thanatopraxis*, from the Greek θάνατος (*thanatos*—death) and πρᾶξις (*praxis*—practice).⁶ It consists of two narrative tactics: zooming in to an exaggerated level of representation of death, and tearing up the storyline to render its circumstances unintelligible. Both of these strategies work to the same effect: they allow the overall gruesome picture to remain beyond any given prosaic screenshot. To use Erich Auerbach's language of "creating a foreground and background,"⁷ *thanatopraxis* plays in a peculiar way on the dynamic between excessive foreground and recessive background.

This combination of selective auxesis (broadly understood as overstatement) and meiosis (understatement) results in a routinization of horror, an effect achieved by simultaneously emphasizing its bodily

⁵ Chernetsky, "From Anarchy to Connectivity," 111. For English translation of the novel, see Serhiy Zhadan, *Depeche Mode*, trans. Myroslav Shkandrij (London: Glagoslav, 2013).

⁶ In proposing this term I rely on its conveying the apophatic praxis of death in literature, with only distant connections to the similarly named mortuary science and Jacques Derrida's consequent use of *thanatopraxie* to explore what might be referred to, with much simplification, as textual embalming.

⁷ Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus's Scar," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 7.

mechanics and obscuring its human context. Horror is thus routinized because this approach advances its “anti-sentimentality,” to use James Wood’s term.⁸ By sabotaging the process of narration a reader would normally rely on to comprehend a story and react to it, *thanatopraxis* renders the horrible processable in pieces.

In his insightful *How Fiction Works*, Wood notes how cinematic the modern narrative becomes after Flaubert. A section aptly titled “The Awful and the Regular” focuses on “the zoomlike action of the lens, as it gets closer and closer to the corpse.” In Wood’s analysis, this zoomlike action is fairly nonselective: pointing to an ant that drags “some sort of bundle” along an upper lip of a dead soldier in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, he exclaims: “The protagonist seems to be noticing so much, recording everything! . . . Would any of us actually see as much?”⁹ As if in response to this observation, the literary *thanatopraxis* opts for a very different kind of zoom technique. Writers drop the bigger picture and the general detail of Wood’s examples, and add an unstable dashcam effect to the very selectively focused lens of their prose. If Crane was practicing this technique, we might have learnt much more about that ant’s “bundle” without catching a single glimpse of the corpse, its position, or even its location.

A new kind of literary cinema emerges: mortality is carefully inserted into narratives that combine details of human destruction with a striking lack of clarity and consistency regarding the circumstances of violence portrayed. The underlying assumption is that some phenomena cannot be verbalized or described, but they can be felt and experienced.¹⁰ An example of this idea can be found in Psalm 34, which calls to the believer to “taste and see that the Lord is good.”¹¹ Here, two of our five senses are directly engaged in grasping a concept. As a technique, *thanatopraxis* targets senses and rejects explicit elucidations as well:

⁸ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Picador, 2009), 46.

⁹ Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 46.

¹⁰ Though linked with Hannah Arendt’s understanding of *praxis* as an essential aspect of the active life, *vita activa*, the use of this notion as proposed here is also grounded in its applications in spirituality. In the context of the divine, *praxis* refers to a first-hand encounter with concepts that cannot be comprehended through the rationality of the mind.

¹¹ Psalm 34:8 (King James Version).

The modern person . . . is not endowed with such fibers of the soul that could receive the electrodes of the literary word about fear—and the physical, the painful, is the only way I can imagine delivering information about the incredible physiological intensity of this feeling.¹²

Invited to immerse ourselves in abounding confusion, we as readers edge closer to the characters: like them, we are left without any answers or some sort of reality control group to measure the storyline against. In essence, we become their witnesses, or even their jury. Unsurprisingly, in these cases the jury often finds itself deadlocked.

Nikolai Gogol (Mykola Hohol), too, offered us a thesaurus of the macabre, while often keeping us in the dark about the larger context and problematizing possible conclusions. His texts, however, are more reminiscent of epic poems. The great knight's entrance in "Strashnaia mest'" (A Terrible Vengeance, 1831), for instance, is hardly short of spectacular: "What knight of inhuman stature gallops below the mountains, above the lakes, reflected with his gigantic horse in the still waters, his endless shadow flitting terribly over the mountains?"¹³ A few decades later, Oleksa Storozhenko, a writer from the town of Poltava, close to Kharkiv, incorporated a similar Gothic motif into "Zakokhanyĭ chort" (Devil in Love, 1861). Storozhenko's lyrical, sing-song prose also builds on otherworldly material, intertwining reality and fantasy and leaning heavily into the folkloric tradition.¹⁴

Both Gogol and Storozhenko arguably sought to create an image of Ukraine as a poetic place, shrouded in legends and beauty. Post-Soviet thanatopraxic writers have no such goal. Their universe shifts from their predecessors' all-encompassing country to an individual world of total inner turmoil, unchecked against anything external.

¹² Tsaplin, "Dukh," 48.

¹³ Nikolai Gogol, "A Terrible Vengeance," in *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1999), 94.

¹⁴ For more on this, see Svitlana Kryś, "Folklorism in Ukrainian Gotho-Romantic Prose: Oleksa Storozhenko's Tale about Devil in Love (1861)," *Folklorica: Journal of the Slavic and East European Folklore Association* 16 (2011), 117–38.

They become novelists who, in Wood's terms, "want us to inhabit a character's confusion, but will not 'correct' that confusion, refuse to make clear what a state of nonconfusion would look like."¹⁵

For example, in Krasniashchikh's "The currant demon," a group of rather dubious witnesses constructs a story of the murder of several children. They are a textbook example of unreliable narrators, to use the term coined by Wayne C. Booth.¹⁶ These witnesses' halting descriptions ("Blood on the floor. Lots of blood. Literally puddles of blood. Blood on the walls, on the furniture, and a whole sea under the sideboard."¹⁷) are evocative of the famous horror flashes in Stanley Kubrick's 1980 classic *The Shining*, where a river of blood gushes out of opening elevator doors.¹⁸ But while the evil presence in Kubrick's film acts through a distinct agent, Jack Torrance (though its actual cause or source is concealed), the perpetrators in Krasniashchikh's text stay entirely obscure. Even more important, it remains unclear whether any crime has taken place at all. Drawing the violence from his country's past and inserting it into the present, Krasniashchikh and his fellow writers leave it up to erratic narrators and bewildered readers to navigate the details and attempt to construct a bigger picture. Zooming out, indeed, is one thing such authors are not overly concerned with.

This intense focus on details serves to conceal the odd deficiency of agency in these accounts. And agency is, in fact, one of the main themes raised by thanatopraxic texts. The narrative of "Demon" ends with an unknown speaker (an accomplice?) trying to comfort an unknown offender by outlining a pyramid of responsibility for his alleged malevolent deed. The proposed scheme assigns divine omnipotent forces ("god, because he made you this way") to the top grada-

¹⁵ Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 13.

¹⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 158–59.

¹⁷ Krasniashchikh, "Smorodinovyĭ bes," 213.

¹⁸ Interestingly, Stephen King's novel does not include this and other famous moments of Kubrick's film. It has been noted that "most memorable aspects of the film—the ones that have become embedded within popular discourse—are not in the book. It tends to be the brief, wordless shots that resonate most" (Karina Wilson, "Book vs. Film vs. Mini Series: *The Shining*," *Litreactor*, June 26, 2012, <http://litreactor.com/columns/the-shining-book-vs-film-vs-mini-series>).

tion of blame, while the anonymous addressee fits cozily on the very bottom.¹⁹ A comparable negotiation of responsibility takes place in “Spirit instead of human” by Tsaplin. This short story describes the similarly incoherent destruction of a man named Masich by blood-thirsty spirits summoned by a nameless narrator, who appears to be as unreliable as they come. “I’m not making excuses,” he professes in an effort to explain his nonintervention when his friend was under attack. “To whom should I justify myself? Do you really think it was easy to give Masich away?”²⁰ This narrator spends the entire story trying to convince us that he is not liable for what happened to the unfortunate Masich, attributing it instead to higher forces at play. At the end of both stories, a reader is left wondering what the hell (literally) just happened in them. Akin to the black holes of Zhadan’s *Voroshylivhrad*, these texts urge us to fill in the unknown in order to make sense of the narrative.

At the start of this chapter I emphasized the trauma-based aspect of these works. It is therefore worth pointing out that the two stories share another important trait: allusions to, and descriptions of, overpowering forms of fear. “The air smelled of thunder and our fear,” muses the first witness in “Demon”—“In turmoil none of us knew what to think. A black, very black sky opened up over our souls.” The protagonist of “Spirit” echoes: “Just fear. Total fear. Nothing but fear. . . . Fear lasts for ever.”²¹ This disorienting dread is not only supernatural; it is also incommunicable. “You cannot feel this fear, cannot comprehend it, cannot survive it, no matter how much I describe it in an abstract evil voice,” insists Tsaplin’s narrator, while some of Krasniashchikh’s witnesses spend entire paragraphs on apparent linguistic gibberish.²² These testimonies to incommunicability set a backdrop for narrating crimes that are incomprehensible as well. Incomprehensible, that is, except through *praxis*. “One cannot prove anything. One can only show it. One can only flame up with it. One can only

¹⁹ Krasniashchikh, “Smorodinovyĭ bes,” 219. See chapter 3 for full quote.

²⁰ Tsaplin, “Dukh,” 47.

²¹ Krasniashchikh, “Smorodinovyĭ bes,” 211, 212; Tsaplin, “Dukh,” 48.

²² “I am exercising in discursive practice, especially tautological writing and psychotic narrative,” the author dutifully declares when his turn comes to testify in the story (Krasniashchikh, “Smorodinovyĭ bes,” 215).

believe it. One can only be forced to believe it,” ruminates the narrator of “Spirit” before offering a haphazard account of another man’s—Masich’s—violent demise.²³

These two short stories, “The currant demon” and “Spirit instead of human,” engage in *thanatopraxis* insofar as their authors attempt to convey death through detailed and often bizarre close-ups, without explanation. Pools of blood fill Krasniashchikh’s mystical “bad apartment,” which had brought death to its previous tenants as well, and Tsaplin’s vicious spirits tear out Masich’s intestines, stomach, and kidneys (in that carefully articulated order). And to top off these writers’ general focus on the mysteries of human agency, it is not just the parties responsible for these atrocities who remain nameless or missing from the narratives. Where the perpetrators are vague, victims can be indistinct as well. To add to the overall confusion, or perhaps to emphasize it, neither crime leaves a body. The children simply vanish from the evil apartment, while the stitched-up Masich continues to wander around as before, albeit now with an evil spirit inside. And then the stories end—without culmination, elucidation, or even conclusion.

This can be perceived as an intriguing inversion of the hypothesis of misrecognition, which states that the notion of intrafamilial misrecognition serves as the allegory of the Soviet terror.²⁴ In related examples, those who are closest to people released from labor camps fail to recognize them on their return. In our examples, it is the rest of the world that overlooks essential transformations within the characters—a demon that enters a father; an evil spirit that now controls Masich—while the narrator alone is not fooled, and is understandably terrified. In yet another case of boundaries often blurred in Kharkiv fiction, the incongruous style of narration of both stories leaves the line between sanity and psychosis rather vague (for a more detailed discussion, see chapter 5). A recognition-despite-disguise may or may not be evidence of madness. In other words, it may or may not be a sound judgment. But in either case, it feels acutely real to its subject. The isolated, unshared nature of this private knowledge serves an important purpose: it underlines the characters’ quintessential solitude.

²³ Tsaplin, “Dukh,” 46.

²⁴ Etkind, “Parable,” 640.

Both narrators have had a traumatic past prior to this point. Faced with their experiences, and having lived to tell the story, they alone know what happened, and they cannot (or do not want to) formulate it. “Something has happened, but no one except me had any idea what it was,” whispers Krasniashchikh’s child narrator before staying entirely alone (*odin-odinëshenek*) under the table in the bad apartment. Meanwhile, the soul of Tsaplin’s disturbed storyteller “shudders in a mute scream” when the possessed Masich smiles at him on a busy street. Oblivious passersby are deaf to his unvoiced agony. In essence, both stories are about tête-à-tête encounters between speakers and their tortured memories of a nameless personal catastrophe. In other words, these are indeed tales of trauma.

As such, efforts to analyze them may benefit from Freud’s idea of afterwardness. Freud argues that the intense emotions of a traumatic experience are not felt by the victim of trauma during the moment of trauma itself. These emotions hit a person belatedly, often in the form of images or sensations (flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations, and a variety of bodily symptoms) that seem to have no clear cause.²⁵ According to this approach, the structure of space and time gets reconfigured, in a way, for the victim of a traumatic episode. This concept may help theorize intense narrative descriptions that hover on a single moment, suspending it into a longer duration, or deviate from ordinary spatial relations.²⁶

Surviving the unspeakable

In an analysis of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s recurring nightmare about seeing her imprisoned husband, Osip, and asking him desperately: “What is being done to you ‘there’?” Etkind notes the lack of any appropriate concept that could replace the notion of “there” in this context. The nightmare could not refer to the Gulag by name, he sug-

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Project for Scientific Psychology,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), vol. 1, 295–343.

²⁶ I am thankful to Matthew Mangold for his insights on this theory.

gests; instead, an unspecified “grammatical fiction” was necessary.²⁷ In Bulat Okudzhava’s short story “Devushka moeĭ mechty” (Girl of my dreams, 1985), a mother returns home from labor camp, and her son’s need to know the unspeakable keeps him constantly on the brink of asking “How was it *there*?”²⁸ In “Demon,” hiding under the table as night approaches, the children worry: “What was happening *there*, near the sideboard? . . . Are they being tortured or something?” And Tsaplin’s narrator warns: “All that talk about how a human life is worthless is nothing but journalism. It has a worth, it does. *There* they know exactly how much. The spirits know.”²⁹

This unarticulated, shapeless *there* runs through all these accounts like a grey thread, signaling the catastrophe behind them. “The text of the novel itself—the text of memory—is unable to accommodate the horror of murder,” writes Lipovetsky of Osip Mandelstam’s thirty-page novella *Egipetskaia marka* (The Egyptian stamp, 1928).³⁰ This observation can help explain the torn-up, piecemeal stylistics of both “Demon” and “Spirit.”³¹

In his study of *The Egyptian stamp*, Lipovetsky notes that “its entire stylistics aim to conceal, rather than to reveal, the trauma that generated this text.”³² He proceeds to suggest that the novella plays out both the demise and the resurrection of this trauma’s subject, allowing the Author to survive while his other self, the character Parnok, is swal-

²⁷ Etkind, “Parable,” 640.

²⁸ Bulat Okudzhava, “Devushka moeĭ mechty,” in *Devushka moeĭ mechty. Avtobiograficheskie povestvovaniia*, 107–21 (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1988); italics added.

²⁹ Krasniashchikh, “Smorodinovyĭ bes,” 212; Tsaplin, “Dukh,” 46; italics added.

³⁰ Lipovetsky, *Paralogii*, 108.

³¹ This approach parallels the “compromise by which the command of reality is carried out piecemeal,” which Freud ascribed to post-traumatic melancholia. See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Pelican Freud Library*, trans. James Strachey, XI (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 253. Additionally, such rhetoric emulates “the piecemeal logic of torture, which also manipulates parts of the body with the aim of changing the whole of truth, integrity, and history” (Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013], 236).

³² Lipovetsky, *Paralogii*, 80.

lowed by eternity. Like other works discussed in this book, *The Egyptian stamp* assigns a special active role to fear: "Fear takes me by the hand and leads me."³³ Akin to the intensive processing of Parnok's death, the *thanatopraxis* of our two writers substantiates the endangerment of the "I"—the driving force behind a postcatastrophic being. Suffering that encroaches on the "I" is recognized and explicitly announced in both stories: "Each of us thought: what if I am next?" in one and, in the other, "Both of us would have been killed." This angle of personal involvement, of the mere possibility that the "I" could cease to exist, sheds light on otherwise odd tales: they are not just post-traumatic witness narratives, as the preceding section concludes; they are narratives of direct participants in traumatic events. One is told by a possible survivor; another, by a possible perpetrator.

Indeed, the extent of these characters' tormented isolation can be linked to another direct effect of trauma: depersonalization, an anomaly of self-awareness. In Okudzhava's "Girl" the returned mother is unable to process her son's questions and to respond in the first person: "Are you hungry?"—"Me?" (*hochesh' est'?—ia?*).³⁴ Likewise, the protagonist of "Spirit" is worried that it was not really he who knocked on his doomed friend's door that fateful night, and it was "I—not I" (*ia—ne ia*) who screamed frenziedly when the spirits attacked them both. Meanwhile, the multiple "I's" of narrators in "Demon" scatter around until they lose all borders and encompass God himself: "I am god; I saw everything" (*ia—bog; ia vsë videl*).³⁵

In this struggle of the self—a first-person dilemma, if we build on Bernard Williams's "one-person conflict"³⁶—the "I" fights a losing battle for intact survival within the text. In contrast to Williams's one-person conflict, which refers primarily to an internal moral struggle, a first-person dilemma is an existential one: not what one should do, but whether (and who) the "I" really is. This anxiety is rooted in yet

³³ Osip Mandelstam, "Egipetskaia marka," in *Sobranie sochineniï v chetyrekh tomakh. Tom vtoroi. Stikhi i proza 1921–1929* (Moscow: Art-Biznes-Tsentr, 1993), 494.

³⁴ Okudzhava, "Devushka."

³⁵ Tsaplin, "Dukh," 43, 50; Krasniashchikh, "Smorodinovyï bes," 215.

³⁶ Bernard Williams, "Conflicts of Values," in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 73.

another shared trait of the two stories: both protagonists grapple with having done something illicit. When the adults leave for the evening, Krasniashchikh's children hide under a table and try to fetch candy from the other room, which launches their demise: "We should not have done this!" Tsaplin's nameless hero fancies himself a medium and, together with his doomed friend Masich, deliberately evokes the spirits that proceed to attack them, despite having plainly stated earlier that "spirits should not be summoned."³⁷ In one way or another, along with issues of agency, remorse and regret enter both narratives. Part of the struggle of the "I" in these stories is rooted in processing guilt, and in negotiating blame, following an act of rule-breaking that preceded both catastrophes. Bargaining for redemption under the heavy weight of potential responsibility, the "I" gives ground in its struggle for continued demarcation (wholeness) within the plot, and the readers watch it shatter. Like the mother in Okudzhava's story, these protagonists cannot stop examining: "Me?"

In fact, Tsaplin's self-professed medium in "Spirit" explicitly refers to his account as "Recollections of pain. Of an irreversible impact."³⁸ A desperate attempt at inner justification emerges amid his ramblings, veiled safely in unsystematic references to shamans, scholars, and Jesus. There are situations in which morality must be discarded at once, he insists, or one's life will end. This, he assures us, is not a confession; it is a survival manual. He proceeds to explain that "merciless" and "unsentimental" fear destroys individuality—it erodes the "I" (*strakh razrushaet "ia"*) that had tried, foolishly, to put morality above survival. A key to the whole story emerges amidst this reasoning: if the mind refuses to carry out its responsibility of preserving the body, "natural selection" will take that mind away (*otberët razum*). Mental anguish, bordering on mental illness, stands behind the (textual) shattering of the "I."

In response to harrowing reality, it appears, texts can react with sickness just as people do. Yuri Gudzh' described his novel *Ne-My* (Not-Us, 1998) as precisely a story of illness of a literary text (*istoriia khvoroby literaturnoho tekstu*) that gobbles up its own author.³⁹ Mark

³⁷ Tsaplin, "Dukh," 47.

³⁸ Tsaplin, "Dukh," 48.

³⁹ Yuri Gudzh', "Ne-My," *Kur'ier Kryvbasu* 103 (1998): 23. The expression *istoriia khvoroby* also stands for a patient's medical history, a health record.

Andryczyk argues that Gudź' links mind, body, and text to express a "state of abnormality."⁴⁰ Subsequent generations appear to have inherited this condition as part of their historical lot.

The ambiguous beings whom Tsaplin's survivor has processed and presented to us as uncanny and invincible—as spirits that should never be summoned, but that he proceeds to summon nevertheless—at one point break his and his friend's fingers. "It works in a horrible way," he remarks earnestly, "one cannot quite think of anything when your fingers are being broken."⁴¹ A violent event must have taken place in this person's life, at least in his life as he perceives and articulates it. This catastrophe, whether external or internal, has left him alive but affected by guilt. Struggling with his role in the larger scheme of things, he obsessively offers reasons for how everything worked out, to the point of incoherence. One of the causes of this concealed agony could be survivor's syndrome. "I am a monster," he notes matter-of-factly at the start of the story.⁴² It was not easy to give up a friend, but one human being must always be surrendered to the spirits once they are summoned. In the character's mind, he made a choice that had to be made. Or so he would fiercely like to believe.⁴³

Tsaplin's angst-ridden narrator might find a place near Nadezhda Mandelstam and Mykhailo Osadchy, who questioned the reality of loss and of survival long before he did. Osadchy's prison memoir *Bil'mo* (Cataract, 1968) uses similar techniques, such as stream of consciousness, to do so. At one point Osadchy describes his imprisoned self as a small, clumsy table, which no one can find a place for.⁴⁴ He tackles the reality of being a victim and a survivor. Meanwhile, Krasniashchikh's "Demon" questions a highly related reality—that of perpetration. Osadchy, who hailed from the nearby Sumy oblast, created

⁴⁰ Andryczyk, *The Intellectual*, 77.

⁴¹ Tsaplin, "Dukh," 44.

⁴² Tsaplin, "Dukh," 43. Survivor's syndrome, or survivor's guilt, was a recognized diagnosis until 1994. It is now redefined as a significant symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1994).

⁴³ The first story examined in chapter 5, "Squirrels," features an old man who articulates this struggle in gruesome detail.

⁴⁴ Mykhailo Osadchy, *Bil'mo* (Paris: Smoloskyp, 1971), 13.

a surreal atmosphere to convey absurd and awful life events. And Krasniashchikh offers us a set of garbled and often absurd testimonies that are hard to distinguish from a game and (at times) even a farce. “They’re all playing,” confirms the author, explaining that the characters and the readers engage in a mutually “unattainable task” of penetrating each other’s worlds.⁴⁵ The former try to (re)enter reality, and the latter seek to recognize everything as a game with no direct links to their life. As a result of this impossible duality, descriptions of a crime scene mingle with shopping lists and haphazard medical arguments against the amputation of one’s hooves.⁴⁶

This can be approached as a kind of *stěb*—a type of humor which, in literature, is “often expressed through reducing the plot to absurdity.”⁴⁷ Essentially, it is irony formed during, and informed by, the times of conceptualism. According to sociologist Boris Dubin, *stěb* consists of provocatively depreciating certain symbols through their demonstrative use in a parodic context.⁴⁸ In the case of “Demon,” this is true not only of, for instance, demonic attributes to be medically amputated, but also of larger concepts, such as testimony (garbled), witness (unreliable), truth (questionable). Referring to the *stěb* discourse, Alexei Yurchak contends that its instances “refused every possible binary distinction, always balancing in multiple zones in-between.”⁴⁹ As observed above, one of the distinctions that get blurred in the process is the line between seriousness and play, allowing the in-between condition to penetrate and inform contemplations of victimhood and perpetration in fiction. And this draws fiction into reality—for, as we know, the boundary between victim and perpetrator was particularly faint under the Soviet regime.

⁴⁵ Andrei Krasniashchikh, interview by the author, April 16, 2012; see chapter 3.

⁴⁶ Here one might enjoy discreet parallels with Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*.

⁴⁷ Antonina Plat, “Iumor, ironiia, stěb—chto eto takoe?” November 28, 2008, http://zhurnal.lib.ru/p/plat_a_n/humour.shtml.

⁴⁸ Boris Dubin, “Kruzhkovyi stěb i massovye kommunikatsii: k sotsiologii kul’turnogo perekhoda,” in *Slovo—pis’mo—literatura. Ocherki po sotsiologii sovremennoi kul’tury* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001), 163–74.

⁴⁹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 252.

Thus, the historical conditions that give rise to *thanatopraxis* form a grey area that both thrives on and suffers from ambiguity, evocative of Agamben's "zone of indistinction." Like Osadchy's remembered self, who is neither a free individual nor a clumsy table, or Mikhail Lermontov's demon, who belongs to neither heaven nor hell and is neither darkness nor light, stories such as "The currant demon" and "Spirit instead of human" are informed by paradoxes that help bring imaginative writing ever so close to the intricate nature of reality itself.⁵⁰

Traversing the unspeakable

As a perpetrator, Tsaplin's narrator—like Lermontov's demon—is also a sufferer. This fusion was of interest to the preceding generation of Ukrainian writers as well. In Yuri Izdryk's novel *Votstsek* (1997), for instance, the title character suffers from a mental condition that causes him to lock his family in a basement in order to protect them from the world. After the police free them, he is locked up in a mental institution, where he struggles desperately with names and faces that continue to haunt him.⁵¹

This elusiveness of the perpetrator-sufferer frontier is also evident in "Depo na Lybids'kii" (The Lybids'ka depot) by Oleh Kotsarev (b. 1981). Of the three main texts analyzed in this chapter, this one is the least fragmented. Its plot follows an old tram depot through a turbulent "epoch of changes."⁵² As the Soviet Union collapses, the depot is privatized (which happened on a mass scale during those years) and turned

⁵⁰ Mikhail Lermontov wrote in "The Demon": "to ne byl angel-nebozhitel' . . . to ne byl ada dukh uzhasnyi . . . ni den', ni noch',—ni mrak, ni svet!"—" 'Twas not an angel that redeems, . . . 'Twas not a fiend from Hell below, . . . Not day, not night, not dark, not bright" ("The Demon," trans. Archibald Cary Coolidge, *Slavonic Review* 4 [1925]: 288). Lermontov's demon not only belongs somewhere between heaven and hell, but is also both guilty and pitiable: the reader is supposed to feel his longing, pain, and loneliness. And speaking of agency gradations, none of it is his choice—arguably, it is the fault of the one who made both him and Tamara.

⁵¹ Yuri Izdryk, *Votstsek* (Ivano-Frankivs'k: Lileia-NV, 1997).

⁵² Oleh Kotsarev, "Depo na Lybids'kii," in *Neimovirna istoriia pravlinnia Khlo-rofituma Pershoho* (Kyiv: Smoloskyp, 2009), 48.

into a supermarket.⁵³ But during this reconstruction, one of the new co-owners is found murdered on site, in a makeshift grave of concrete. No proper investigation ensues, and the perpetrators are never identified.

The disturbed remains of the murdered co-owner, Vyshnevets'kyi, give rise to a ghost that begins to haunt the premises. He is particularly fond of breaking and shattering doors, even during the supermarket's busiest shopping hours. But he also seems drawn to remaining bits and pieces of the old tram depot: preserved spots of old paint, for instance. The narrator suggests that Vyshnevets'kyi, who worked in the depot's management before the "epoch of changes" arrived, is tortured by "the sin of privatization": "How else can one explain the ghost's unexpected nostalgia for the times of the tram?"⁵⁴ Guilt-ridden for his role in the depot's illicit dismantling, its former manager, now a desolate ghost, boards a translucent otherworldly tram once a month and dashes around the streets where the rails used to be, yelling and causing quite a few scares.

Intriguing parallels with Gogol's Akakii Akakievich emerge from this darkly comic description. Like the manager Vyshnevets'kyi, the clerk Akakii Akakievich haunts the living and hungers for revenge in the celebrated story "Shinel" (The Overcoat, 1842). But our manager cannot obtain his revenge because the weight of guilt is also on his shoulders, contaminating the purity of the postmortem fury depicted in "The Overcoat." After all, he played a role in his own demise when he engaged in financial manipulations. Here "A Terrible Vengeance" surfaces once more: sometimes, as the cruelest punishment, one is deprived of the possibility of avenging oneself. Helpless and cursed, the great corpse in "Vengeance" grows larger underground from gnawing his own bones in agony. And Vyshnevets'kyi descends into his own underworld, in the form of the defunct tram system he keeps retracing.

But one evening, a down-to-earth woman named Lina finds Vyshnevets'kyi hovering miserably in mid-air in the supermarket. Intent on

⁵³ For a study of economic shock following the collapse of the USSR, and of the human toll of mass privatization, see David Stuckler, Lawrence King, and Martin McKee, "Mass Privatisation and the Post-Communist Mortality Crisis: A Cross-National Analysis," *Lancet* 373 (2009): 399–407.

⁵⁴ Kotsarev, "Depo na Lybids'kiĭ," 51.

buying cigarettes, and busy contemplating whether or not to purchase a snack as well, she is quite annoyed with the apparition. With a curse she shoves the pensive phantom out of the way. This physical contact, a worldly acknowledgement of his existence, suddenly unbolts the gateway that the door-breaking ghost himself never managed to open: it reverses the passage of time and launches the locale's temporal transformation into its memory of itself. The supermarket vanishes, and Lina finds herself surrounded by old trams. Roaming around to find an exit, she gets pulled into one of them and ends up riding around the city with Vyshnevets'kyi all night. In the morning, upon getting home, she gives birth to a sparrow. These ethereal rides become a regular occurrence for the rest of her life, and her birds all settle on the roof of the former depot. The story ends with the narrator informing the reader of this fact.

Vyshnevets'kyi was both the perpetrator of a crime (large-scale financial fraud) and the victim of one (murder), fitting right in with the reality-questioning worlds of Tsaplin's and Krasniashchikh's narratives. He is both immaterial and tangible, both dead and able to give rise to life (no matter how tiny). Trapped between two epochs of the same locale, he represents the notion of a phantom of locality, not just of person: the specter of the depot, where Lina finds herself after cursing and shoving the forlorn ghost, is a site of memory of years long gone.⁵⁵ It is also a site of criminal activity, in at least two instances: illegitimate privatization of state property, common in the 1990s, and the subsequent disposal of Vyshnevets'kyi's body. Ruled by the after-shock of these transformations and traumas, the shifting eras even cut off Lina's mobile signal—notifications of missed calls arrive only when she gets home. The sparrow is born shortly afterwards.

According to *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*, the sparrow is a symbol of "divine awareness of even the lowliest creatures."⁵⁶ And when portrayed exiting a cage, it serves as "a symbol

⁵⁵ For sites of memory, see Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁵⁶ Hope B. Werness, "Sparrow," in *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 384, referencing Matthew 10: 28–30.

of the human soul escaping the material plane and ascending to heaven.” The painless emergence of a sparrow from a woman’s body, then, illustrates deliverance, release, which leads to the appeasement of a regretful and unavenged ghost.⁵⁷ Vyshnevets’kyi finally looks content and “dreamy” on that shared tram ride. One wonders whether Lina became pregnant through the ear, and whether it was the telling of his story that released the ghost from his turmoil.

Vyshnevets’kyi’s traveling back in time on his unearthly tram—or, rather, his merging time, past and present, during his wild rides, with their agonized recitals of remembered passages from books he had never read (a fascinating parallel to Anton from “The main entrance,” who named the undead after authors he never read)—failed to console him. But when he takes Lina along, both are hooked. In addition to his recitals, the intrinsic nature of memory is represented powerfully by the phantom tram’s traveling only down those streets that had once contained its rails. This evokes the connections the tram system used to enable, destroyed with the coming of the new epoch. Haunted by such recollections, and haunting the place of their convergence, Vyshnevets’kyi finds some comfort in the company of a listener. The life-affirming allegory of birth introduces a future into his past-present entrapment.

But why does the practical-minded Lina, a woman who does not hesitate to curse and shove a floating specter because it got in her way, continue to seek him out “like a lunatic”? Her own creator calls her a former “woman-tractor,” clarifying that this description applies to Lina’s “metaphysical power” back in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁸ Now, once again repeats Kotsarev, “the times have changed.” So the author makes sure to refer, albeit fleetingly, to this character’s past in the previous century, as well as to some drastic changes she underwent after it ended. An inhabitant of a new epoch with lifelong links to the old one,

⁵⁷ A dove leaving a human body would have holier associations; but a dove would also suggest death, the loss of the soul. In contrast, the sparrow is a down-to-earth, everyday little bird, and its emergence does not seem like death. It is more of an *otdushina*: a release and a relief. I am grateful to Sibelan Forrester for these contemplations.

⁵⁸ Kotsarev, “Depo na Lybids’kiĭ,” 53.

Lina is in need of healing, too. Like us, she is a direct (and troubled) witness to the brink of epochs Lipovetsky mused about.

This brings us back full circle to the subject of trauma. In literature, the cultural meaning of death and resurrection of the main hero has been linked to a wish to resurrect time, to start a new “normal” cycle of history in light of the existing painful one.⁵⁹ But how does one interpret the sizeable place given by contemporary Kharkiv writers to insanity, or (true to the blurring of lines) at least to the possibility of insanity? That the plot might be the result of confusion or madness is signaled in “Depot” with linguistic pointers such as a “mad tram” (*shalenyi tramvai*) or “like a lunatic” (*mov lunatyk*).⁶⁰ This is also illuminated by an account of a tram-related psychosis in another of Kotsarev’s short stories, “Tramvaïnyi intsydent” (A tram incident, 2006). Michael Wood’s concept of drunk reality described by a sober observer could be an apt one in this context.⁶¹ We can understand an intoxicated person’s take on the world swaying around him, but how do we process a world that sways despite an observer’s sobriety—a world that is just not okay? “Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and other beasts help authors and readers discuss history that is not comprehensible by other means. Such was the Soviet period,” suggests Etkind.⁶²

In addition to the Soviet legacy, however, writers who deal with the turmoil of the 1990s face the challenges of describing a very different epoch. On top of the previous era’s control from above, which in a post-traumatic sense has not yet been fully worked through, they must also process the post-Soviet general indifference. American poet Stephen Dunn (b. 1939) lamented a similar state of affairs in his poem “Because We Are Not Taken Seriously” (1981):

⁵⁹ See, for example, Lipovetsky, *Paralogii*, 322.

⁶⁰ This theme parallels Nikolai Gumilëv’s famous poem “Zabludivshiisia tramvai” (The lost streetcar), which has been discussed by a multitude of analysts and critics. This poem, published shortly before Gumilëv’s death at the hand of the Cheka in 1921, undertakes a staggering flight through space and time with distinctly modernist elements, and features the motif of headlessness, among others.

⁶¹ Michael Wood, “In Reality,” *Janus Head* 5 (2002): 11.

⁶² Etkind, “Stories,” 657.

Some night I wish they'd knock,
on my door, the government men,
looking for the poem of simple truths
recited and whispered among the people.⁶³

Dunn's lyrical hero dreams of being a poet whose "loneliness, finally, is relevant," and places the ghosts of Mandelstam and Lorca on his shoulders. Stripped of the value of the forbidden, indifference shakes one of the main pillars that supported literature on terror: the weight of the writer's voice. Contemporary authors in Ukraine must work without this dark but powerful resource. Without it, ghosts, vampires, and werewolves still emerge, because the catastrophe must still be processed. But they traverse pieces of torn text and broken narratives that reflect the chaos of the 1990s.

Andryczyk highlights the "prevalence of the sick intellectual protagonist in the prose of the Eighties Writers." This is an invariant of their texts, he maintains, attributing it to "the general state of disorientation and chaos that engulfed Ukraine together with euphoria" when the Soviet Union collapsed.⁶⁴ The protagonists we are seeing in the country's newest fiction, however, are anything but intellectuals. Their creators, too, have largely lost the status of the cultural hero in post-Soviet society—a role that was still accessible to their predecessors.⁶⁵ And while the previous generation of writers tended to include psychiatric hospitals in the narratives of their "sick intellectual protagonist," the younger authors appear to have dropped this medical verdict. In a way, it was too explanatory for them. Their suffering characters are a part of our drunk reality instead.

The landscape of fiction changes: terror and repressions, which the older writers struggled to make sense of, allowed for a relative con-

⁶³ Stephen Dunn, *New and Selected Poems: 1974–1994* (New York: Norton, 1994), 112.

⁶⁴ Andryczyk, *The Intellectual*, 81.

⁶⁵ An interesting, though separate, project might involve applications of Harold Bloom's controversial "anxiety of influence" to the current dynamics between the generations of artists in Ukraine or in the former USSR (See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973]).

tinuity of anguish that could find its way into texts that attempted to address it. There was a source, the state, which consistently bred the pain that fuelled the writing. Post-Soviet indifference and emptiness are a different kind of foe: like Vyshnevets'kyĭ, they float dejectedly in mid-air and break things in helpless fury as people shove them out of the way in search of cigarettes and snacks.

Today's doubletake writers have layers of trauma to address: they face a palimpsest, or a burial ground with several strata of bones, where each tier needs a different kind of understanding. As a result, they do not shy away from death in the slightest, but its reasons and perpetrators are no longer the main focus. These authors are more interested in how things feel, how things impress themselves upon a human being—thus, *thanatopraxis*. As the post-Soviet generation attempts to make sense of its heritage—to embrace the reverberations and repercussions of the mangled vase they are presented with—eras shift, and texts fall apart.

Writing about the unspeakable

“Poetry will remain irreplaceable for us as long as there are no other means of communicating the incommunicable,” writes Tsaplin in “Malen'kiĭ schastlivyi vecher” (A small joyful evening, 1995).⁶⁶ In this context, prose plays a similar role. “One must write in a complicated and slightly incomprehensible way,” he explains. “This is required by the subject of writing. . . . Wishing to write in a simple way means wishing to lie.”⁶⁷ The argument, Tsaplin proceeds to clarify, is not that complex writing manages to reflect the actual substance of things, but that it captures their essence. *Thanatopraxis*, the literary tactic of extreme close-ups on death amidst a frayed narrative, is part of such effort to capture the essence of what is otherwise indescribable. If this practice is to be honest—if one does not “wish to lie”—then the text must reflect the actual incongruity of experience.

⁶⁶ Tsaplin, “Malen'kiĭ schastlivyi vecher,” in *Malen'kiĭ*, 10.

⁶⁷ Tsaplin, “O pisanii i postizhenii,” in *Malen'kiĭ*, 26.

In “Chtenie” (The reading, 1995), Tsaplin offers another argument for the disconnectedness of contemporary prose. He readily admits that the hectic nature of modern life does not allow for the “honest” reading of complex texts that he himself has called for. So he proposes a method of “new reading” that consists of irregular, “unsystematic” explorations of several random pages at a time. Because this technique presumes using a text in ways unplanned by its author, concludes Tsaplin, there is only one solution: to start writing in ways that presuppose “new reading” in the first place. That is, in self-sufficient fragments. He maintains: “If the socio-historical conditions force us to read in a new way, then we must write books that can and should be read that way.”⁶⁸ Whether this method is really “new” might be the subject of some debate (think, for instance, of the Oulipo, or of works by Milorad Pavić), but what is clear is that some contemporary Ukrainian writers do follow this advice.⁶⁹

Sashko Ushkalov, the author of *BZhD*, observes in his preface to Kotsarev’s collection of short stories that Kotsarev’s texts often end unexpectedly, as if they have no end at all.⁷⁰ Likewise, “Brug” ends with one of the drunken gentlemen contemplatively attempting to roll the statue’s head while his friend vomits nearby. It concludes with the satisfyingly laconic “the head rolled poorly” (*golova katalas’ plokho*). Fragmentation of texts, indeed, includes not only abrupt endings and disconnectedness within longer narratives, but incongruous short stories as well—not unlike works by the well-known Russian absurdist Daniil Kharmis. In 2007 an eloquent reviewer mused:

Fiction is more than just a device for transmitting information or learning about reality or dissecting problems. Fiction is about simultaneously outing and satisfying our innate desire for nar-

⁶⁸ Tsaplin, “Chtenie,” in *Malen’kii*, 38.

⁶⁹ Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle), founded in 1960, was a group of writers and mathematicians who experimented with unusual writing techniques. Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1979) is one captivating example. Serbian author Milorad Pavić (1929–2009) is known for novels written in unconventional formats, such as a dictionary (*Dictionary of the Khazars*, 1984) or Tarot cards (*Last Love in Constantinople*, 1994). They can be read effectively from any point.

⁷⁰ Sashko Ushkalov, “Made in Kotsarev,” in Kotsarev, *Neimovirna*, 8.

rative. Kharms, admittedly, does more of the former than the latter.⁷¹

So do our writers. Pieces consisting of a few brief paragraphs without an immediately apparent or an entirely coherent plot—an abridged type of *zarisovki*—are, for instance, Kotsarev’s *Podorozh, Zhinka z shampurom, Nema, Zaduma, Tumbochka i zyma*; Tsaplin’s *Briug, Vese-laia truba, Detskaia noch*’; and, though longer, arguably Krasniashchikh’s *Teogonivo* (dedicated to “early Tsaplin”) or *Illuzion*.

In his piece on Kharms, George Saunders highlights “a fresh respect for, and (importantly) suspicion of, storytelling itself,” which results from our reading of such texts. We are reminded that a narrative is but “a trick a writer does with language.” But while Kharms’s brilliant creations may have resulted primarily, as Saunders argues, from his innate intolerance for artifice, the writers covered in the present chapter are arguably tearing up and zooming in on their texts in an effort to convey the conglomeration of layers of incomprehensibility and responsibility they face as post-Soviet authors.⁷² By creating their swaying worlds around sober observers (us), they are keeping us aware of all that is still to be unveiled, reassembled, and addressed. Violence enters the present in exactly the way it feels: convoluted, perplexing, and immediate. People whose lifetime is heavily punctuated by history end up punctuating their stories in fierce, unexpected, yet captivating ways.



The three short stories discussed in this chapter are reflections of their writers’ intensive and creative processing of topics similar to those that affected the grandfather in Tsaplin’s “Glue”: loss and reckoning

⁷¹ George Saunders, “Soviet Deadpan,” *New York Times*, December 9, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/books/review/Saunders-t.html>.

⁷² Sibelan Forrester points out yet another possible layer of complexity for this generation: “A particular kind of discomfort: maybe it’s not my fault that these people weren’t buried properly, but they’re wandering and haunting as ghosts. Does my fear of them and desire to escape them put me on the same side as those who repressed them?” (e-mail correspondence, March 22, 2013).

with loss. All three authors get particularly involved with navigating the overlapping frontiers between victims and perpetrators. The final speaker of “The Currant Demon” implores: “You know, pal, don’t tell anyone about this. You’ve told me, and that’s enough. To me it also sometimes looks as if we’re the ones who killed them.”⁷³ This vagueness of perpetration might be one reason why both Krasniashchikh’s and Tsaplin’s prose includes a story in which the main characters either watch their own funeral or interact with their own grave.⁷⁴ Another reason, of course, could be the need for burial before one can move on. Kotsarev has not produced a similar cemetery setting so far, but he did come up with a story in which the narrator gets trapped in a train sent to haunt him, and eventually escapes from it in a way that strongly resembles a death experience. In the end, he sits by a peaceful heavenly river and watches his feet turn golden in the water.⁷⁵ “Enter the train” sounds like a familiar cue in this book by now—trains are the main carriers of time in doubletake fiction, “railcars of the Soviet era in the post-Soviet space.”⁷⁶ This motif is fueled, at least in part, by Kharkiv’s shimmering transit nature.

Lidiya Ginzburg wrote that events occurring within one’s consciousness can reach a level that renders empirical experience useless.⁷⁷ Indeed, these intense inner processes can obscure (or enhance) reality itself. In “Mechtatel” (The dreamer, 1995), for instance, Tsaplin contemplates a person who walks down a familiar street: “He walked here last time and dreamt of something distinctly, with details—and now he remembers it, and is uncertain: it is imagined, but it also existed.”⁷⁸ The line between reality and fiction, between one’s external and internal worlds, grows ever so vague. All kinds of specters from the past start crossing it unhindered, because there is no actual border between the past and the present in reality—and “even less so in the

⁷³ Krasniashchikh, “Smorodinovyĭ bes,” 219.

⁷⁴ Krasniashchikh, “Karusel’,” 29–36; Tsaplin, “Mërtvye i zhivye,” 16–17.

⁷⁵ Kotsarev, “Zminy u rozkladi,” in *Neimovirna*, 145–57.

⁷⁶ Afanas’eva, *Soldat belyĭ*, 99. Pelevin’s *Zhëltaiia strela* (1993) is another example of a narrative featuring a temporal train (Victor Pelevin, *The Yellow Arrow*, trans. Andrew Bromfield [New York: New Directions, 2009]).

⁷⁷ Lidiya Ginzburg, *Zapisnye knizhki. Vospominaniia. Esse* (Saint Petersburg: Iskustvo-SPB, 2002), 71.

⁷⁸ Tsaplin, “Mechtatel’,” in *Malen’kii*, 40.

realm of magic.”⁷⁹ Literature, like memory or imagination, is a place where what is lost can be put back together, with a wide array of degrees of accuracy, and leap up whole and frightening. *Thanatopraxis* is what happens when it leaps up shattered.

This chapter has argued that the practice of *thanatopraxis*, or selective zooming in on death, is one of the tactics writers have utilized to approach these post-Soviet phantoms. A fusion of deconstruction and naturalism, it renders apparitions of death more accessible. These apparitions cannot be conveyed merely “with an abstract evil voice,” as the anguished survivor of “Spirit” lamented. But, as Psalm 34 suggests, they can be tasted and thus glimpsed, albeit inwardly. *Thanatopraxis* is one way to achieve this effect in literature. Traversing the post-catastrophic grey area of overlapping frontiers and thriving in a zone of indistinction, it utilizes a new variety of “piecemeal rhetoric”⁸⁰ to offer a type of “new reading” that fits and illuminates the haunted historical period it represents.

⁷⁹ Etkind, “Stories of the Undead,” 655.

⁸⁰ Freud, “Mourning.”

Chapter Five

FRONTIERS OF (IN)SANITY

Only the madman or the rare case of genius can inhabit
a world of meaning all by himself.

—*Peter Berger (1963)*

The stories examined in this chapter consist of a peculiar kind of monologues. Their halting, fragmented narratives are shaped into a vortex—rather than a stream—of consciousness. Semicohherent storytelling, rife with nonchronological associative leaps of thought, reflects the nonlinear nature of traumatic memory involved in creating such vortices.

The themes of these monologues can be divided into two broad groups. In one, protagonists engage in confessional recollections of traumatic events. But unlike the narrators introduced in chapter 4, these characters are relatively clear about what happened to them, ranging from a childhood blunder to a violent murder. To process the consequences, their recollections rely on the overlapping frontier between sanity and madness. The exhibited method of navigating unstable post-traumatic consciousness is to smudge those mental orientation points that signaled instability in the first place. This first theme is temporally oriented, as the concept of trauma relies on the quality of time.

Notions of transitional realms and transformational states feature in the second discernible theme of these monologues. They surface when the narratives involve the experience of death. Rather than crisscrossing

the life-and-death boundary, like the narrators featured in chapter 3, these protagonists focus on the other side of this frontier. They never quite reach it, however—their tales foreground transit as the most important, semipermanent voyage of all. Transit becomes a purpose. The chosen mode of navigation of blurriness for these characters is to become mobile, establishing movement as their ultimate principle of being. This renders the ideas of stability or coordinates less pervasive, and therefore less decisive. The second theme is spatially oriented: it reaffirms place and placefulness as “the heart of things” and a fundamental value.¹

These two leitmotifs intersect in the present chapter because it would be imprudent to discuss one’s experience of death without keeping the frontiers of (in)sanity in sight. “My memory bleeds, wounding itself on sharp edges of reality, which leave marks and incisions; thanks to them, I will always be able to recall this astonishing, slow yet irrevocable movement,” ruminates one of Zhadan’s narrators, linking together the final two modes of literary engagement with zones of indistinction discussed in this book: descending into wounded memory and incessant movement through liminal states.²

Monologues of madness

For the well-dressed young man traveling in a comfortable train compartment, an erratic monologue by a chance fellow passenger—a peculiar and shabby old man—was hardly more than a source of nuisance. And for readers, for whom these first-person ramblings constitute the entire short story called “Belki” (Squirrels, 2003) by Kharkiv-born writer Alexander Kamenetskii (b. 1972), the old man’s chatter starts off as a light nuisance as well. After all, one can only chuckle at comments like: “Interesting watch you got there . . . Real stones? Why curse, son, why offend the old man? What didn’t I understand? Ah, not zhopa! . . . Once again? ‘Chopard,’ then . . . I’ve gone deaf as a stump.”³

¹ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 120.

² Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 66.

³ Alexander Kamenetskii, “Belki,” *Soiuz Pisatelei* 6 (2005), <http://sp-issues.narod.ru/6/kamenetskiy.htm#3>. Chopard is a brand of expensive jewellery; *zhopa* is Russian for “ass.”

But as the young man starts dozing off, this casual monologue turns into a tale that is hardly short of terrifying. The wealthy listener with a Chopard watch will not hear the end of it: by the story's last pages he will be fast asleep, drugged by a drink the old man had poured for him, leaving it up to the readers to carry the burden of the perturbing revelations. By piecing together shreds of information strewn about this wandering narrative, we learn that the old man used to be an *urka*—criminal slang for bandits and thieves. He spent years in the camps of Siberia before being released in the amnesty of 1953, an event he regards with gravity: "Many were freed back then who'd be better off bagged and drowned in an ice-hole."⁴ The storyteller's chatter gets more somber as his semiwilling listener grows sleepier. When the young passenger no longer hears it, the narrative ends with a chilling account of a graphic bloody execution of a family in a wintry taiga village.

It takes some attention on the part of the reader to notice that by this point, the monologue had turned into a confession. Though the old man refers to the murderers as "the five," he lets one pronoun slip out among the last words of the tale: "we." In the starving and freezing winter of 1953, five amnestied criminals, now surviving as hunters, emerge from the woods of the Komi Republic (a region in Russia, west of the Ural mountains). They are following hordes of deranged squirrels that are fleeing to a human settlement from hunger and cold. The hunters' sole intention is to sell these squirrels' fur in the nearby town of Inta. But when they knock on the door of the closest house, a retired policeman opens it. They recognize him, and everything changes:

You never know how the past is going to catch up with you. Learn this alphabet, [and] learn it well; if you fail the exam of life, it's your last time, like a minesweeper. One early morning deep in the taiga an old *vertukhaï* met an old *urka*, and both of them had a gun—these things happen, and worse happens too.⁵

⁴ This line evokes powerful parallels with the 1987 film *Kholodnoe leto piat'desiat tret'ego* (The cold summer of 1953), in which a remote settlement is under attack by a group of recently-released criminals. Two political prisoners try to defend the settlement together with the locals.

⁵ *Vertukhaï* is criminal slang for a prison guard.

Brutal revenge soon follows this chance meeting, with “the five” ending the lives of their former guard and—after violent gang-rape—of his widowed daughter.⁶ In the process, a mentally ill child dies a separate, gruesome death as he tries to escape the bloodbath. “Such is the fairy tale, son. Of course, grandpa made some things up. . . . Sleep tight,” concludes the old man to his slumbering companion, robs him, and disappears at the next train station.

“Squirrels” touches on a number of intertwined themes, including the relationship between generations (“Your blood is different, of the wrong color,” sighs the narrator), as well as history—Stalin, Beria, and Gorbachev all find their way into the twists and turns of the narrative. The notion of retaliation is ominously present in the story. It encompasses not only the policeman’s slaughter by his former inmates, but also a blurrier type of present-day reprisal that manifests itself in the reader’s odd but persistent lack of sympathy for the robbed young passenger. The storyline makes it clear that his fancy possessions, including a gun, were acquired in questionable ways, and that he was less than thrilled to find a poorer traveler in his nice train compartment. When his jaded companion teaches him a lesson in over-inflated self-confidence, therefore, some readers might find it hard to commiserate. “You’ll be a murderer, son, it is written on your forehead,” remarks the old man at one point. The blurred boundary between victim and perpetrator emerges here with renewed vigor: if you rob someone of things he stole from others, who is to blame? If you harm a man who has wronged others, who is at fault? The second question, granted, is harder to navigate.

The story’s most important theme is that of the faint line that circumscribes sanity. The motifs of madness in Kamenetskiĭ’s text are multilayered. First, there is the mental illness of an adopted child, Pashka, who was placed into the policeman’s care after his parents died in a corrective labor colony. Then, there is the widowed daughter’s unrelenting grief for her late husband, killed in the Battle of Kursk

⁶ Sergeĭ, the suicidal protagonist of Krasniashchikh’s “American roller-coaster,” believes that “the system of the universe (including the world of the dead) is held up, as if by hinges, by the law of vengeance.” This balance was disrupted by the unavenged death of Jesus Christ, and since then, murderers help restore the lost order (Krasniashchikh, “Amerikanskĭe gorki,” 164).

in 1943—this tragedy “tore something inside of her: she turned all black, arms hanging, and walked around lifeless (*nezhivaia*).” Looming over these supporting characters’ suffering is the psychosis of Ermolai, the policeman himself. This one builds up slowly, triggered in part by starvation and savage weather conditions:

People slowly go mad in such weather, son: a person sits, sits, and suddenly explodes. Maybe it’s fear, or fury, or something else; some even start hitting their heads against the wall. Why? Don’t know; it’s a mystery of nature.

Ermolai’s deteriorating state is aggravated by the hunters’ malevolent decision to pile up the squirrels’ dead bodies by his window—“to make things scarier.” His eventual mental collapse introduces a fourth type of lunacy in the story: this time, a bestial one. Ermolai owns two gentle small horses, whom the whole village adores and who, in turn, adore his adopted ailing grandson Pashka. From the moment these animals sense the hunters’ approach through the woods, however, they do not stop neighing. Through the days that follow, they continue to scream. The setting is chilling: “Everyone is scared, everyone is hungry, plus this neighing—like in hell, and frozen squirrels keep piling up under the window.” Finally exploding, the “rabid, screaming, bellowing” Ermolai pushes the horses out of the house, into the deadly cold.

Ultimately, this cruelty results in the animals’ discovering the giant heap of dead squirrels. Inexplicably feasting on meat amid absolute starvation—“when the world turns upside down, son, the laws of nature no longer apply”—they turn into blood-toothed demons that haunt their owner’s property. Even their whinnying ceases to be equine. When little Pashka escapes the massacre at home, they are the ones who devour him in the back yard. As such, they complete the representation of loss of oneself in face of dire trials: derangement can extend to all life trapped in tragedy, human and animal alike. The world itself might be deranged, flipped upside down: “summer isn’t summer, winter isn’t winter” anymore. Michael Wood’s notion of drunk reality, in which the world (rather than the observer) is unwell, surfaces here once again.

This story is rife with transformations: former inmates turn into guards as they terrorize Ermolai’s family; watchman turns into a pris-

oner; policeman turns into a madman; horses turn into predators and, perhaps, humans turn into beasts in the final scenes of rape and murder, where a father is forced to lick the gun covered in his daughter's blood. The fluctuations of sanity in the narrative encompass the elderly train passenger as well: one can deduce that he was the youngest of "the five," as well as the one to shoot the assaulted young widow in a particularly atrocious way, as ordered by the group's leader. Like Tsaplin's summoner of spirits, he says he did it to protect himself. After that, everything gets foggy: "blood everywhere, blood on his snout too." This reference to one's face in bestial terms is not accidental. People are worse than animals, professes the old man; this is a lesson he learned firmly from life. A person is a creature whose ugliness is concealed: "a monkey, but a crippled one. The inside is bestial." Human mutations occur in the worst possible place—the brain.

One can perceive these contemplations as the character's general disillusionment with humanity, but they can also be interpreted as a disguised hatred of himself. Veiled by buffoonery and cynicism, the quiet notes of the old man's (possibly only semiconscious) repentance nevertheless shine through in rare moments, such as his adoring account of his love for horses: "A horse is like Jesus Christ: he looks at you with such kindness, such tenderness, as if he understands everything, . . . and can forgive everything." Describing the scene of the woman's execution, he asks his listener rhetorically, without pause: "Could you have done it? And he—he fired. . . . He fired, and saved his own skin." Although justifications have solidified in the elderly outlaw's mind for over half a century and do not seem to torture him in an acute way, it is clear that he has not been able to forget that day, either.

Memory, in fact, plays an immense role in "Squirrels." "The five" would have left in peace, insists the old man, but as they smoked their cigarettes after recognizing Ermolaï, they "remembered everything right away, remembered it well. One forgets many things, son, but some things stay in your head to the grave, impossible to extract." The ruthless execution in a small taiga village, and his own role in it, is clearly one of those things for the old man. But above everything else, above the flailing morality and horror and subsequent justifications, he remembers the cold. The tangible, physical, bodily assault of inhuman temperatures, which he describes at one point as -50°C . In a story of five thousand words, he mentions this five separate times.

In fact, a reference to “that winter’s frost” starts the narrative. So cold was that year, says the speaker elsewhere, “that I still cannot warm up my bones.” And yet again: “That winter was more terrifying than the end of the world.” At the story’s finale, one is left wondering whether it was external or internal chill that affected him so deeply the winter of his release from prison half a century ago. It appears as if, over the years, his memory has associated complex mental suffering with a more straightforward—physical—distress. Writer-psychiatrist Afanas’eva might have found such experiences to be “so logical and coherent when memory gets involved, and so inexplicable when direct perception starts working,”⁷ in light of our penchant for retrospective rationalization.

Afnas’eva also contends that certain events in life “deprive us of the right to a blank sheet of paper, and create us in equal measure to our creating them; sometimes it is impossible to figure out who came first.” Reflecting this confusion, “Squirrels” is written in a style that serves as a prime example of a literary technique known as stream of consciousness. It is differentiated from standard first-person narratives by heavily fragmented direct speech. Writers use such speech to fluff up their texts into seemingly unedited, unfiltered, and therefore ostensibly sincere accounts that rely on just one character’s vision, and are therefore particularly sensitive to the fluctuations of the state of the speaker’s “I.” One of the best-known examples of such writing is William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), whose unreliable narrators include a mentally handicapped person and a severely depressed one. Nonchronological storytelling, associative leaps in thought, and lack of punctuation are typical characteristics of classic stream of consciousness. In Kamenetskii’s text, however, consciousness does not quite flow—instead, it churns, whirls, and forms a vortex, which swallows much of the underlying complexity of emotions and leaves the reader with only the character’s unsophisticated verbalization to sort through.

By purposefully shrinking the protective layer of literary language and general coherence, such monologues present the reader with the innate rawness of experience, challenging him or her to deconstruct

⁷ Afanas’eva, *Soldat belyi*, 67.

the entangled accounts and, by going so, to cope with the uncertainty of perspective and (in)sanity embedded in the text. Of course, the apparent incoherence of direct speech is as artfully constructed by its authors as any successful linear narrative, since the reader's attention must be maintained and nurtured through even the wildest whirls of consciousness. Like the writers who engage in *thanatopraxis*, those who produce texts with vortices of consciousness rely on the Psalm 34 supposition: for something to be comprehended, it must be experienced as directly as possible, preferably through the senses ("tasted and seen"). Having to make one's way through unrefined, raw monologues, picking around for clues and allusions, is one of the best ways to experience the perplexity they stand for.

Another short story that relies on similar literary techniques and deals with the theme of mental illness is Kamenetskii's "Taburetka" (The backless chair, 2005). This text is a monologue of a patient who had tried to commit suicide, and is now telling "dear professor" that he is doing perfectly fine.⁸ The storyline focuses on an embarrassing bodily event that happened on a backless chair when the speaker was a child. Though his family found it hilarious, the situation was brutally humiliating for the young boy: it led to his first suicide attempt. Embedded into this narrative are signs of an ongoing mental illness: sadness, maladjustment, isolation, and general unhappiness the speaker felt as a child, long before his public blunder. "My conscious life began when I lost the skill of laughing," he explains. Indeed, similar situations can usually be survived with the help of humor. But something lived inside this narrator, something that "began its existence by massacring laughter." This "inner enemy," which he identifies as a devastating awareness of being human, proceeds to "methodically destroy every positive thing within its reach." The little boy's dim view of humanity as a whole is similar to the old man's disparaging position in "Squirrels." His distress is halted, albeit temporarily, only by a fleeting visit to the realm of death.

This is a curious tale of trauma. The destructive mental "inner enemy" placed inside this speaker (*pomeschchënniy v menia vrag*) has an external source. It is portrayed as a violation introduced into the

⁸ Alexander Kamenetskii, "Taburetka," *Soiuz Pisatelei* 6 (2005), <http://sp-issues.narod.ru/6/kamenetskiy.htm>.

boy's body without his consent. This echoes the distribution of agency in "The currant demon": recall that "the first guilty one is god, naturally, because he made you this way." But one's encounter with death is described here as salvation: according to the narrator, his decision to kill himself following the mortifying incident, and the resulting illness that kept him delirious for days, managed to cure him of his misery. His latest suicide attempt, dozens of years later, is nothing but an "unforeseen malfunction of the brain's gears." He has led a normal and healthy life, concludes the speaker, because nothing can hurt a person after he survives his personal backless chair.

This monologue of the aching "I," in which an individual life is split into before and after a traumatic event (a definitive personal catastrophe), can be read as a tale of getting a taste of the other side: the entire plot frames the narrator's childhood suicide attempt. This near-death experience proves vital for his subsequent survival into his forties, he insists. He does not mention what he encountered while unconscious, but as we will see, other characters in these stories do.

A similar style of narration about mental pain—direct speech, erratic parasite words, unexpected tangents, and casual semicoherency—marks the short story "Vizit v stranu vopiashchikh" (Visit to the country of wailers, 2011) by Oleg Petrov (b. 1979).⁹ Its first paragraphs propose new notions: self-hell (*samoād*), self-horror (*samouzhas*) that might describe the old man's winter of 1953 in Kamenetskiĭ's "Squirrels." Here they precede a narrator's visit to a land where everyone shouts in pain, and where suffering is considered to be an unavoidable, everyday occurrence. This city has a name that "consists of just one, perfectly extended vowel." The narrator, whose uncanny visions and erratic formulations raise questions about his mental stability, finds it by following distant voices of a heavenly choir. One soon learns that he was hearing the city's interminable cry of pain rather than the gentle singing of angels.

As discussed in chapter 4, the essence of the "I" serves as one of the main protagonists in this fiction, fueled by the layers in the "I" of the doubletake writers themselves. I have argued that "the 'I' gives

⁹ Oleg Petrov, "Vizit v stranu vopiashchikh," *Soiuz Pisatelei* 14 (2012), <http://magazines.russ.ru/sp/2012/14/p6.html>.

ground in its struggle for continued demarcation (wholeness) within the plot, and the readers watch it shatter.” Here, in vortices of consciousness, the main state of the “I” is not fragmentation but perpetual pain: “What hurts you, exactly?—Life itself hurts unbearably. [The] I hurts (*ia bolit*).”¹⁰

In his analysis of Sasha Sokolov’s *Shkola dlia durakov* (*School for fools*; written in the 1960s, published in the US in 1975), Andrei Zorin shows that the narrator’s mental illness—or, in a more faithful translation of the Russian term, his illness of the soul—shapes and defines the literary technique of the text. In a monologue addressed to his other self, the narrator of *Shkola* “erases all temporal and causal connections, so that the events under discussion feel simultaneous, or rather, as a single multidimensional event.”¹¹ This simultaneous eventfulness reemerges in stories like “Visit,” where the characters’ unclear state of mind allows them to articulate experiences beyond the familiar boundaries of temporality and causality.

In her analysis of madness in the work of Joseph Brodsky, Rebecca Reich asserts: “The poet—a master of both language and the ‘art of estrangement’—is uniquely capable of reinventing reality.”¹² To different extents, these stories are intent on at least trying to do so. Similarly, in his examination of the literary approaches of the older generation of Ukrainian authors (such as Yuri Andrukhovych, Oleksandr Irvanets, Viktor Neborak), Myroslav Shkandrij notes that their “new writing, while acknowledging [the imperial experience], reworks all available elements into a new consciousness and identity.”¹³

As part of the same discussion, Shkandrij maintains that postcolonial writing deemphasizes the bigger picture, concentrating instead on “the contemporary individual’s relationship to the surrounding environment.” Some echoes of *thanatopraxis* can be found in this notion. Another way to relate to one’s surroundings, however, is to focus on transit, and to keep moving.

¹⁰ Petrov, “Vizit.”

¹¹ Andrei Zorin, “Nasylaiushchii veter,” *Novyi mir* 12 (1989): 251.

¹² Rebecca Reich, “Madness as Balancing Act in Joseph Brodsky’s ‘Gorbunov and Gorchakov,’” *Russian Review* 72 (2013): 46.

¹³ Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine*, 266.

Death, movement, place

In its entirety, Petrov's "Visit" evokes the image of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, a painting where the world seems to curve around pure agony. On closer examination, one finds multiple references to death in the speaker's erratic wording. This is, in fact, a tale of death—but not of death-in-itself. Rather, it is about dying as a process (recall Krasniashchikh's comment on how gradual it is). The story focuses on transit towards death, perhaps better described by a fitting synonym: passing. As a woman explains to the narrator in the screaming city, pausing to moan in agony, death does not exist: everything is immortal. Pain is endless, just like life. In contrast to Dante's famous *Inferno*, this eternal suffering has no discernible cause. It is simply a part of changing one's condition—of passing. As the narrator of "Visit" navigates away from the shining and shouting city, his journey and reflections begin to make sense despite their apparent senselessness: he is simply shifting states—crossing boundaries. And though this particular crossing is temporary, there is no end to the journey itself.¹⁴

Petrov offers a more consistent portrayal of the realms of death in "Totenburg" (2011), which aims to depict "the life of the dead."¹⁵ Relying heavily on the concept of emptiness, this text maintains that the dead ascribe the highest value to those things we, the living, "consider to be dissolved in nonexistence." Such nonexistence is beyond emptiness: "their entire world consists of that which is less than emptiness, and it's all that holds it up." This idea is faithful to the notion of reversals and transformations exemplified by "Squirrels," where "the world turns upside down." In addition to the transposed world structure (their existence is what we consider nonexistence), another enticing revision is proposed here: it is not the dead who enter our homes, it is we who enter theirs.

¹⁴ In Afanas'eva's work, musings on death echo this sentiment: one of her narrators claims that death is "a pure transition into a different qualitative state" (Afanas'eva, *Soldat belyi*, 137).

¹⁵ Oleg Petrov, "Totenburg," *Soiuz Pisatelei* 14 (2012), <http://magazines.russ.ru/sp/2012/14/p6.html>.

Before the reader rushes to check whether Petrov's descriptions apply to the literature under study, however, the narrator reminds us: "I hope no one needs to have it explained that the dead are not those who have died here, but those who eternally live there." The realm of the dead is, in fact, the world of those who have never lived (*mir nikogda ne zhivshikh*).¹⁶ After some initial confusion, one finds that this makes sense: we are truly separated only from those shadows who were never here in the first place. As for those who have lived—they remain in our world forever. There is no separate place for people who have lived and died: they are still around, now simply in a different state. They are not dead per se. The preceding chapters have offered some examples of such coexistence in doubletake literature.¹⁷

This framework attends to the lack of clear demarcation lines around these shifting states of being. In fact, in "Snyl'" (2011), another complex monologue of possible madness by Petrov, the speaker exclaims: "Stay away! Once you die, just stay away. A great rule, but no—they won't listen."¹⁸ Zhadan's narrator insists on the same concept in *Anarchy in the UKR* when he describes continuous encounters between the living and the dead inside the Kharkiv metro system: "Your trajectories are constantly intersecting. . . . Turns out there is no difference between those who have left and those who stayed."¹⁹ It appears that everyone is always moving, and no one ever leaves.

In all likelihood, it is the living who haunt the dead, and not vice versa. The dead merely exist "in the voids of our memory." Sometimes, however, they are noticeable: from time to time they appear in our world as reflections. This is because the lenses between different dimensions are usually positioned in "mutually concealing

¹⁶ Petrov, "Totenberg."

¹⁷ For another (double)take on this coexistence, see "Utro Poliny" (Polina's morning, 2009) by Tamara Bel'skaia (b. 1973). Shifting freely from first-person to third-person narration of one young woman's life story, this semi-autobiographical novella features a main character whose interaction with others includes her recollections of her relationships with them in previous lives (Tamara Bel'skaia, "Utro Poliny," *Novaia Iunost'* 6 [2009], http://magazines.russ.ru/nov_yun/2009/6/be4.html).

¹⁸ Oleg Petrov, "Snyl'," *Soiuz Pisatelei* 14 (2012), <http://magazines.russ.ru/sp/2012/14/p6.html>.

¹⁹ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 161.

ways,” Petrov explains. But every once in a while the gap between them shifts slightly, rendering a lens temporarily visible. In fact, if one takes a certain long journey to the countryside, as mapped out in “Totenburg,” one can find a place where “the other side” is continually discernible. It is a spot marked by absolute silence. On this border between dimensions, the reader is invited to make an essential observation: it is not just the worlds of the living and of the dead that have a right to exist as complete entities. The part of reality which we “disdainfully call transit” exists as a universe in its own right, and even rises above both worlds that are accessible to us.

Evocative of the difference between a boundary and a frontier—the former referring to linear division, the latter having “zonal qualities” and referring to “the persistence of a zone after the delimitation”²⁰—this universe falls in line with border theory’s assertion that two sides of a boundary form a complete, independent whole. This eloquent affirmation of the standalone value of transitional and hybrid realms, where currents meet and worlds converge, rings true of Petrov’s hometown, Kharkiv. Like the zonal overlap in Totenburg, the eastern borderland of Ukraine comprises “the ‘ethos’ of life with the other.”²¹

Kamenetskiĭ draws Kharkiv even deeper into this interminable transit framework by dedicating a whole story to the city’s famed cableway. The tall structure that carries small colorful cabins across a big green park, from one part of the city to another, also lent its name to Mashen’ka’s story in Krasniashchikh’s *Park of Culture and Leisure*. Kamenetskiĭ’s “Kanatka” (The cableway, 2005) is a tribute to transit without destination, to movement without a goal.²² Its beginning and end are equivalent, explains the author, whose text presents Kharkiv’s cableway as a local metaphor for the Tibetan idea of *bardo*.

Translated literally, *bardo* means “an intermediate state.” A concept that arose after the Buddha’s passing, it refers to the state of existence between one’s lives on earth. A notable parallel is the notion of lim-

²⁰ Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 4.

²¹ “Pohranichchia,” *Polit.ua*.

²² Alexander Kamenetskiĭ, “Kanatka,” *Soiuz Pisatelei* 6 (2005), <http://sp-issues.narod.ru/6/kamenetskiy.htm>. Not to be confused with Krasniashchikh’s “Podvesnaia doroga,” though both terms refer to the same iconic landmark.

inality (from the Latin *limen*, or threshold)—the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during transition stages of rituals. Introduced by Arnold van Gennep, this effort to theorize intermediateness was picked up and developed in the course of the twentieth century, in particular by Victor Turner. Originating in anthropology, it provides another approach to envisioning “zones of indistinction,” which stem from the sense of ambiguity inherent to liminal places and states.²³

Placing today’s cableway and its surrounding park (“named after a formerly well-known writer; I doubt that he was deemed worthy of inclusion into today’s school program”²⁴) into a “gap in wakefulness” caused by social cataclysms, Kamenetskiĭ uses it to bring up childhood memories. He traces changes that have taken place since then, and pinpoints a few things that have remained the same. “There is something shamanic in the vibrating movement between heaven and earth,” he contends, and draws memory into this inter-dimensional, liminal vibration by contrasting experiences of riding the cableway as a child with those of an adult—the way Krasniashchikh treats his proposed itineraries through *Park*. One cannot help but conclude that, although this story is dedicated to movement in space, it inextricably deals also with movement in time.²⁵ The two, after all, can be perceived as the Jekyll and Hyde of dimensions.

In addition to the productive metaphor of intermediateness, an equally meaningful parable is born at the very end of the story. The philosophically-inclined rider of the cableway, previously meditative and absorbed, promptly hops out of the little cabin before it dives into the “black thundering abyss” of the engine room. It will reemerge on the other side for new passengers. It is good, the narrator muses, that

²³ For more on liminality as originally conceived, see Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). For Turner’s elaborations, see Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–111.

²⁴ The outdated writer is, of course, Maxim Gorky.

²⁵ The Kharkiv cableway itself represents its own metaphor of transformations: currently used primarily for entertainment, it was launched in 1971 as public transport for factory workers, who could even buy a monthly pass. The city’s growth, new roads, and an efficient metro system put an end to the cableway’s phase as practical transportation.

the dark realm swallowing the empty cabin is closed for you. At least for now.

Devoid of destinations, the circular route of Kharkiv's cableway is essentially a permanent transit zone. But a lucid rider's stay above the treetops, "among the creatures of ether," is temporary. A transit zone, like a transit city, comes with edges that demarcate its limits. This renders it accessible to a human mind, salvaging it from the immensity that could hinder attempts to analyze or theorize it—or, in the case of madness, to escape it. Complete with boundaries, it is a universe—a realm not to be "disdainfully" dismissed, as Petrov warns in "Totenburg."²⁶

This universe, like any other location, sustains and directs memories. At the end of the nineteenth century, Georges Rodenbach wrote: "The city is a guide to action; its urban landscapes are no longer mere back-drops or arbitrary descriptions but are fundamentally involved in the plot of the novel."²⁷ Several decades later, introducing the literary chronotope, Bakhtin described space as "charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history."²⁸ In the early 2000s, Zorin linked cultural memory to architectural space in his discussion on Crimea, suggesting that "the decisive factor in the preservation of the Potemkin project in the collective consciousness is the architecture of a Crimean health resort and pioneer camp."²⁹

Place, with Tuan's connotation of "the heart of things" and Nora's connotation of "a symbolic aura," is reaffirmed in these monologues as fundamental to our experience of both the present and the past.³⁰ In

²⁶ Dmitrii Bykov pinpoints a similar theme in his analysis of Pelevin's *Chapaev and Void*. He writes: "One who has escaped can be found; but not one who is escaping! . . . 'Movement is everything, destination is nothing.' Escaping becomes the most important and dignified state of the soul" (Bykov and Basinskiĭ). At the end of *Chapaev* the protagonist reaches a state of permanent escape, which Pelevin describes as the eternal non-return. Though Bykov focuses on a particular type of transit—running inwards—this view from across Ukraine's border reasserts the meaningfulness of transit.

²⁷ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, 15.

²⁸ Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," 84.

²⁹ Andrei Zorin, "Edem v Tavride: 'Krymskiĭ mif' v russkoĭ kul'ture 1780–1790-kh godov," in *Kormia dvuglavogo orla*, 121.

³⁰ Nora, "Between Memory and History," 19.

the context of his characters' disagreement about the effect of "circumstances" on human beings, Erkhov (author of "Snegomash") might suggest that environments differentiate us: people born in 1970 and in 1995 are going to be different people. Environments also connect us, Kamenetskiĭ might answer, with a nod at "The cableway." People born in Kharkiv are all born there, even as the city shifts in time.³¹

The fundamental connection of memory and place is articulated in detail in "Syn" (The son, 2003), another short story by Kamenetskiĭ. It describes a neighbor's suicide that fails to affect the unperturbed narrator—also a first-person singular—until he learns that the young man had lived in his former room. The snapshot recollection of the view from that window, as well as the bed, the shower cabin, even the air that still smells of his own cigarettes—all these pieces of place-rooted, sense-oriented memory suddenly form a bridge between the narrator and the stranger. "This hanged man somehow forced his way into my life and interfered with it," laments the protagonist.³² He grows even more uncomfortable when the bereaved family moves in next door: without knowing them or even wanting to, he is affected by their tragedy, by their sounds, by the smell of valerian root from their apartment—the way the old crook from "Squirrels" was affected by the physical recollections from the winter of 1953. Trapped in these sensations and overcome by inexplicable fear, the narrator finally runs into the young man's mourning father, who attempts to make conversation. "I had nothing to say to this person, and yet he made me suffer," he professes resentfully and shamefacedly, hurrying to retreat from the encounter. But when the suicide is forgotten in the course of time, he deliberately persists in "remembering for them all."

What is the nature of memory that haunts all these characters, bound by intimate variations of pain and regret? It is physical (tem-

³¹ For citytext of Saint Petersburg, see Vladimir Toporov, *Peterburgskii tekst russkoĭ literatury* (Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2003); of Moscow, see *Gorod i liudi: kniga moskovskoi prozy*, ed. V. V. Kalmykova and V. G. Perel'muter (Moscow: Russkii impul's, 2008); of Kyiv, see Inna Bulkina, "Priznanie v neliubvi: 'Kievskii tekst' v novoi ukrainskoĭ literature," *Novyi mir* 11 (2011).

³² Alexander Kamenetskiĭ, "Syn," *Soiuz Pisatelei* 6 (2005), <http://sp-issues.narod.ru/6/kamenetskiy.htm#3>.

perature, view, smell), and it is fragmented (flashing snapshots through the lines of everyday life). Prose by Victor Shepelev, another one of Kharkiv's doubletake talents (b. 1983), ascribes another trait to recollections: this human experience can also be excruciating. "Returning into moments of memory, whatever they're attached to, is a cruel thing," observes the narrator of his "*Bytovye neudobstva i udivitel'nye prikliucheniia*" (Routine inconveniences and amazing adventures, 2010).³³ Zhadan, too, reflects on the emotional complexity of this phenomenon: "Returning to places where you grew up is almost like returning to a crematorium where you have already been incinerated."³⁴ Echoing Zorin's simultaneous eventfulness, Shepelev notes: "You live everything that happened at the same time, at once; nothing has actually passed."³⁵ Kamenetskii was right: it is good to have the option of forsaking the falling cabin.

The totality of memory is physical indeed: a person "drowns, falls, slips into memory," and feels "with one's entire skin" (*vseĭ kozheĭ*) the poisonous nuances of "living *that* time with *this* body" (italics in the original). As if justifying the variety of reactions—including recoiling—that can result from this sensation, the narrator of "Routine inconveniences" clarifies:

Man has long figured out the properties and characteristics of memory. Some of its contents are worth keeping, and some are to be replaced, displaced, destroyed. The formulas of memory are fairly simple.³⁶

The stories discussed in the present chapter, then, can be perceived as variations on people trying to solve these formulas of memory. Trying and slipping.

The most interesting part of Shepelev's novella, subtitled "Verbatim," relies on the phenomenon of semicoherent monologues. Calling such texts in his work "anonymous sincere presentations," the nar-

³³ Victor Shepelev, "Bytovye neudobstva i udivitel'nye prikliucheniia," *Soiuz Pisatelei* 13 (2011): 171.

³⁴ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 36.

³⁵ Shepelev, "Bytovye neudobstva," 171.

³⁶ Shepelev, "Bytovye neudobstva," 172.

rator ascribes them to a “pendulum of sincerity” that reflects the shift of public preferences from phony and celebrity-oriented yellow press to “anonymous but maximally honest descriptions” of everyday life. Having provided this encyclopedia-like definition, the writer invites his set of semianonymous characters to reflect on general one-word topics, such as “childhood” or “body.” Replying under online usernames like “fybxrf,”³⁷ they take up the challenge, each in his or her own way and tone.

In a strange parallel, just as Shepelev’s encrypted characters react to a given prompt, so do the narrators discussed in this chapter respond—in their own way, earnestly, sincerely, and without much polishing—to another set of topics: madness, pain, and death. Other than the pendulum of sincerity, what might explain this style of writing? The answer lies in the similarity between vortices of consciousness and human memory. By chopping up their characters’ monologues and diffusing their thoughts with associations, pauses, and disorganized tangents, these authors encourage words to take on the characteristics of memory. Fragmented writing reflects fragmented memory; it is therefore true to style.



In *The Lexicon of Intimate Cities*, Andrukhovych remarks: “Kharkiv means authenticity. It’s this tragic museum, where everything can be touched with one’s hands.”³⁸ Vortices of consciousness, like *thanatopraxis*, are a way to make sure things get touched and felt as authentically as possible, shaping experience directly through the reader. In “Routine inconveniences,” Shepelev’s narrator laments that human beings try to process and fit too many complex things into “linear words.”³⁹ The rawness of monologues examined in this chapter is a response to this concern, a “pendulum of sincerity” flying high in

³⁷ This Latin result of Cyrillic keystrokes that spell the name Anichka is a reminder of these characters’ ability to encrypt themselves, to hide, protecting themselves from the sincerity of their answers—but also of their ultimate traceability. Anton had turned into Egor Valentinovich, but he, too, was eventually found.

³⁸ Andrukhovych, *Leksykon*, 437.

³⁹ Shepelev, “Bytovye neudobstva,” 168.

the direction of earnestness at the expense of coherence. This fall of defenses of the “inside-outside boundary” (*zashchita razdeleniia vnutrivne*) may reveal something frightening within: “this thing is inside everyone, they just don’t say it.”⁴⁰ Kamenetskiĭ’s backless chair survivor has already warned us about unnamed entities that can enter us and nest inside without permission. But this blurred boundary also shifts the text away from the typical linearity of narrative that is quite uncharacteristic of memory. That is how it helps bring memory into the story.

Many of Kharkiv’s doubletake works of fiction are stories of recollection, as patchy as any flashback. Blurring the boundary between inside and outside tends to smudge the line between the living and the dead, because it opens the external world (which often, though not always, includes the living) to internal memory (which often, though not always, includes the dead). That is why the vortices of consciousness in monologues of madness, which attempt to express the despair of mental anguish as faithfully as *thanatopraxis* attempts to express death, serve the same purpose: to take the reader on a journey that has no proper, linear structure, and therefore believably reflects the human experience itself—including that of dealing with suffering.

These monologues share another important characteristic: they are tales of an “I” addressed to a “you.” The first person is just one part of their equation; the other main position belongs to a second-person presence. Be it a chance train passenger, a psychiatrist, a second self, or just an undefined addressee, a listener is exposed to stories-within-stories: a tale directed straight at you, an act that establishes a “you” the reader cannot shy away from. Another boundary gets foggy in the process: the frontier between the implied listeners in the text and the readers themselves. As such, these monologues sustain multilayered literary relationships: the obvious link between the speaker and the listener, the more obscure link between the speaker and the reader (the other “you”), and finally—once these gradations are stripped away—the fundamental link between the reader and the writer. A reaffirmation of this connection is one of the top achievements of the stories examined in this chapter.

⁴⁰ Shepelev, “Bytovye neudobstva,” 166, 164.

“The world of the dead breathes the same air with you,” writes Zhadan. “It is only a matter of time. One day you will come here and someone will offer you their seat; you won’t even notice how this happens, you’ll just arrive and stay till a better day.”⁴¹ Until that seat is offered, one’s life is intertwined with the other side, combining the past and the present in a universe that, like Kharkiv’s cableway, has physical borders, but not temporal ones. “I don’t know how many years have passed since I descended from these hills,” ruminates Petrov’s passing visitor to the screaming city, “nor do I know who could possibly count them.”⁴² He may be somewhat comforted if he could hear Zhadan’s *Anarchy* narrator, who insists that a real journey does not need a timeframe or a destination: “The most important thing is to keep moving.”⁴³ Transit, again, is a full-fledged goal of its own. Monologues of the aching “I” take readers on a ride of pained recollection, and although closure is rarely offered, the journey itself proves worth the effort for any connoisseur of memory, madness, and death.

⁴¹ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 160.

⁴² Petrov, “Vizit.” In a curious parallel, Afanas’eva writes: “Hills, hills, like waves, where people appear and hide again. Us, too—we surfaced and drowned” (Afanas’eva, *Soldat belyi*, 121).

⁴³ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 163.

CONCLUSION

Kharkiv's literary map is a map of underground railways, where doomed poets press into each other with the exposed areas of their past.

—*Serhiy Zhadan (2012)*

This study has examined how, in “a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic,”¹ contemporary Ukrainian writers of the younger generation—doubletake writers—work their characters into a traumatized cultural landscape. In such a landscape, the language of categories and coordinates is subverted in favor of blurriness, uncertainty, and the supernatural. I call this cohort the doubletake generation, in reference to their coming of age at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse. Upon reaching adulthood, they revisit the intense historical experience that coincided with their childhood or adolescence—a time when external changes fuse with internal ones, and are therefore not immediately accessible to articulation; at least not to the extent allowed by a subsequent backward glance. Geographically, this book focused on Kharkiv, a diverse and dynamic borderland city that serves as one of the main cultural hotbeds of the “hybrid phantoms” abundant on the brink of epochs.²

¹ Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 71.

² Lipovetsky, *Paralogii*, 408.

Despite its tremendous role in Ukraine's cultural arena and its historic contribution to the Ukrainian national idea, Kharkiv (and east Ukraine in general) has remained understudied following the country's acquisition of independence. Some of the reasons for this situation lie in the popular paradigm of the Two Ukraines. This discriminatory notion positions the eastern part of the country as a contaminated area with an underdeveloped national identity, which is in need of correction. Given the choice between consenting to see themselves as incomplete or ousting the erroneous paradigm, literary figures in Kharkiv have opted for the latter. Notions of indistinctness and fluidity, in which the realms of frontiers are universes in their own right, have found their way into doubletake texts of the city. These realms require new literary mechanisms of orientation and navigation.

The literature under study features blurred boundaries of time and space, which perforate the frontiers of other concepts (such as inside and outside of oneself). The resulting pervasive sense of disorientation demands that readers and characters alike generate strategies for traversing ambiguity. An examination of recent literary efforts to find such strategies leads to the adaption of the concept of cognitive mapping to the nuances and characteristics of the post-Soviet condition, yielding an enhanced form of navigational methodology best understood as cognitive plotting.

Fredric Jameson's conception of cognitive mapping, and the much-discussed spatial turn it signifies, appears to be in need of some adjustment when applied to post-Soviet fiction, where the notion of placing or positioning a character on an increasingly complex grid of postmodernity is undermined by the lack of stable coordinates characteristic of postcatastrophic imagined landscapes. The theory and the language of two transdisciplinary fields, memory studies and border studies, are helpful in formulating an updated concept of a less categorical cognitive plotting. In literature, cognitive plotting consists of devising and employing innovative strategies and modes of navigating zones of indistinction (Agamben), which tolerate topographic ambiguities and incorporate temporal overlaps.

Time, whose function was shrunk by much of the space-oriented cognitive mapping theory, is reintroduced into the notion of plotting as an essential player in the arena of disorientation. Sigmund Freud's time-dependent idea of afterwardness (*Nachträglichkeit*), for instance,

can be convincingly linked to the processing of past events related to authoritarian regimes or violent encounters. This departure from cognitive mapping agrees with the reasoning of Yi-Fu Tuan, a theorist of space and place, who writes: "Space is historical if it has direction or a privileged perspective. Maps are ahistorical."³

In line with this rhetoric, I have sought to formulate a historical, rather than an ahistorical, way to theorize Kharkiv's perforated literary landscape. It is home to "echoes of the Soviet era, [which] should be lived-out and discarded" (*dolzhno byt' otzhito i otbrosheno*), but which stubbornly continue to surround its inhabitants.⁴ If, according to Tuan, place is space endowed with affect, then history is time endowed with meaning. This landscape, indeed, is rife with "black holes in the air around you, containing your entire history."⁵ The placefulness of such a setting—its heightened focus on place, which gets landmarked and expressed and perforated and played with—acquires an important role in the literary efforts at processing the surrounding ambiguity.

The fiction featured in this book is consumed with the relationship between past and present, tied to an ongoing concern with the relationship between competing conceptions of inside and outside. Indeed, one cannot plausibly contest what is inside or outside (inside or outside the margin of sanity, for instance) if one is uncertain about where the border lies. Two predominating patterns can be identified in these texts. One is the authors' tendency to alter the flow of time, either by employing quasi-autobiographical narration or by intertwining past and present. Another pattern is the obscuring of spatial distinctions, which leads to a blurring of boundaries between fundamental notions such as life and death.

To navigate these patterns, Kharkiv's doubletake texts reveal a number of possible methods of voyaging through blurs and overlaps. To aid with examining these methods, chapter 1 contextualized Ukraine, and Kharkiv in particular, in light of the pertinent questions of memory studies (such as legacy or trauma) and border studies (such as regionalism or national identity). Kharkiv's fluidity of self-identification was addressed through a discussion of its regional experience,

³ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 122.

⁴ Afanas'eva, *Soldat belyi*, 123.

⁵ Zhadan, *Anarchy*, 42.

launching the exploration of blurred boundaries by considering them from a social and cultural perspective.

Grounded in this framework, chapter 2 identified the first technique that the literature under study puts forward for dealing with a pervasive lack of clarity: preserving one's memory. Focusing on Serhiy Zhadan's *Voroshylivhrad*, this chapter attended to the functions of memory and forgetting in a landscape where they are coexistent and profoundly connected to life and death, respectively. This novel presents forgetting as the opposite of existence—as nonbeing—or, in spatial terms, as emptiness. The memory-emptiness dichotomy orients a subject in the present by situating that subject in relation to the past. To navigate emptiness, *Voroshylivhrad* puts forward the compass of memory, and shows how it can be used to counter nothingness.

Introducing a collection of short stories by Andreï Krasniashchikh, chapter 3 focused on characters traversing the fertile and populous frontier between life and death. To negotiate this frontier, Krasniashchikh's texts reserve a special role for psychopomps—mythological spiritual guides whose purpose is to assist weary travelers in supernatural border crossings. To detect the presence of such guides in a given work of fiction, I formulated the Charon hypothesis, which identifies the three main signs of a literary psychopomp in action.

Shifting from single-author to multiple-author analysis, chapter 4 used three stories by three writers to propose and discuss a literary technique of navigating trauma and pain, which are linked to the blurred boundary between victimhood and perpetration, and rooted in the notion of guilt. I proposed the concept of *thanatopraxis*, a textual effort to capture what is otherwise indescribable through extreme close-ups on suffering devoid of any background. *Thanatopraxis* combines a heightened degree of descriptive focus with a general incomprehensibility of narrative. Such zooming-in renders trauma processable: one cinematic snapshot at a time. This chapter also started investigating the resulting struggle of the self, in which the "I" fights a losing battle for intact survival within the storyline.

Picking up the topic of the fragmented self and expanding upon it, chapter 5 featured a new set of authors who produce semicoherent monologues that whirl streams of consciousness into vortices. One theme in these monologues of madness involves confessional recollections of definitive personal catastrophes; the other deals with transi-

tional states of being. In both cases, it is unclear where a character's reason ends and insanity begins. Vortices of consciousness occur on the frontier between sanity and madness. Focusing on the nature of recollections that haunt protagonists driven into this frontier by guilt or regret, this chapter examined how writers endow words with characteristics of memory in post-traumatic confessional narratives. At the same time, the texts under study foreground continuous movement as a way of dealing with instability, situating the narrator in a permanently transitional state devoid of rationale. This state is diligently articulated to a second-person presence, a "you" that engages the reader.

The generative role of the reader, in fact, is ingrained in doubletake fiction. His or her creative ideational activity with regard to these texts is decisive in shaping them. The authors' artistic stimulation of the readers' imaginative engagement with the zones of indistinction in this literature is one of its fundamental traits. Each chapter discussed it in the context of the particular navigation mechanism that chapter put forth.

These techniques of trying to position oneself amidst instability and indistinction—maintaining regional identity, preserving personal memory, employing psychopomps, taking exaggerated close-ups of suffering, smudging the periphery of reason, and engaging in permanent motion—were examined here as mechanisms of addressing blurred boundaries in Kharkiv's doubletake literature. Attending to the city's literary production, this book focused on the function of such boundaries in Kharkiv writers' discursive practices, as well as on the protagonists' resulting struggle with trajectories in time and in space.

The frameworks of memory studies and border studies provided productive transdisciplinary lenses for this examination. Their vocabulary is particularly useful and applicable in the context of Kharkiv doubletake writing. In border studies, for instance, centers and peripheries are introduced, and are treated as mobile; their boundaries can—and do—shift.⁶ Likewise, the city of Kharkiv combines its location near the

⁶ An interesting parallel can be observed across the border, where, in a study of the role of the Caucasian frontier in forming Russian literature, Katya Hokanson argues that "the textual connection between center and periphery, be it interior or exterior, was vital in creating the imagined community of Russian readers in the nineteenth century" (Katya Hokanson, *Writing at Russia's Border* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008], 226–27).

border with its role as Ukraine's key cultural center.⁷ This study also adopts border theory's distinction between borders (lines of demarcation) and frontiers (zones that surround these lines). In memory theory, meanwhile, influential scholars have identified writing as one of the essential vessels of cultural memory, with texts turning into active agents in the processing of one's past. And one of the doubletake authors maintains:

A text is justified . . . by giving artistic life to past events, a literary existence to yesterday, in order to grasp life in the present. If we consider it axiomatic that life has meaning, and if we equate text with life, we arrive at another axiom: text has meaning.⁸

When personal experience of a historic past, as articulated by writers, is illuminated by border and memory theories, we gain insight into the intricate role of legacy fiction in literature-centric postsocialist cultures.

Readers are crucial coauthors in this fiction, which tempts their active imaginative engagement by generously punctuating narratives with gaps, voids, and overlaps. "Literature occurred in the voids that suddenly appeared in the air," observes Zhadan, one of the most masterful void-creators in the group of authors under study.⁹ By narrating place and time through text and memory, this literature does not necessarily generate Anderson's imagined communities. Rather, it creates imagined locations: "Can't take my eyes off you—because there is nowhere else to look, and because it's impossible to look away—a perfect beauty, a creature of terror-wonder, flap-eared octopus, indescribable mutant, my post-Soviet space."¹⁰ These might well be William Butler Yeats's words, "A terrible beauty is born," seventy-five years later, transposed across space and time.

⁷ The press release for a Columbia University conference dedicated to Kharkiv described the city as "crucial to the development of Ukrainian culture." For more details, see "Kharkiv: City of Ukrainian Culture," Harriman Institute, March 12–13, 2015, <http://harriman.columbia.edu/event/kharkiv-city-ukrainian-culture>.

⁸ Afanas'eva, *Soldat belyi*, 8.

⁹ Zhadan, "Vykhid," in *Potiah*, 40.

¹⁰ Afanas'eva, *Soldat belyi*, 109.

Granted, it is difficult to write about literature where the boundaries of real and unreal are always in question. This type of project has its conceptual limits. Without intending to be exhaustive—identify all modes of navigating blurriness, discuss all themes that surface in selected works, and so on—this book seeks to frame an important set of literary texts in a new way, fostering fresh inquiries into the intersection of memory, trauma, and narrative in post-Soviet Ukrainian literature.

There are many directions to take from here. Turning the researcher's attention from writers to readers, a project involving reception theory (and its possible revisions or updates) might focus on Ukraine's readers and publishers. Such research would illuminate the ways in which literary memory politics are perceived in one of Europe's largest countries. The literary patterns examined in this book—quasi-autobiographical voices, time looped and reversed, indistinct boundaries that give rise to hazy frontiers—appear to have been a tremendous success with readers.¹¹ But first-person narration and warped timeframes are hardly new in literature. So to what are these readers responding? Does their reaction vary by region or language, both theirs and the writers'? Do the country's publishers, with their own priorities and politics, play a role in magnifying or silencing particular narrations of the past?

Alternatively, given the war in Donbas—Sloboda's neighboring region—and upheaval in other eastern regions, such as Dnipropetrovsk, a targeted exploration of their literary worlds would be of interest not only to cultural and literary scholars, but arguably to social and political scientists as well.¹² A comparison of Ukrainophone and Russophone literature in eastern Ukraine would be another interesting project, particularly in light of the changes that recent confrontations have brought about. A new voice—that of Russian-speakers—has

¹¹ In 2012, Zhadan was among the country's top five bestselling authors, with nearly 24,500 books sold in 2011. These numbers do not include popular free downloads via the internet, to the availability of which he is explicitly committed.

¹² In Dnipropetrovsk, the magazine *Litera_Dnepr* and the almanac *Stykh* offer comprehensive literary coverage, while poet and cofounder of *Stykh* Maksim Borodin might be of interest to those wanting a taste of contemporary lyrical texts from the area. In Donetsk, almanacs *Dikoe pole* and *Chetyre santymetra luny* are active on the literary scene, while writer Vladimir Rafeenko might be the author of interest.

emerged in Ukraine in response to its current realities. I have argued that this manifold presence springs from a set of semantic changes to the thesaurus of the nation, which has expanded to encompass Russophone Ukrainians.¹³ Whether this development has found its way into literature is a question of clear sociocultural relevance. An investigation into Ukraine's Russophone literature that treats it not as Russia's enclave, but as a literary voice of its own, could be very timely.¹⁴

A worthwhile assessment of literary landscapes might involve a comparative study between Ukraine and Russia, where literature-centricity has declined steadily in recent years, or between Ukraine and Poland, where impressive literary voices continue to address the past in ways Ukrainians may or may not agree with. Another fruitful comparison rooted in this study of east Ukraine's borderland literature might involve a similar project focused on western borders. Our understanding of the country's regional diversity in Ukraine could be further informed by an examination of patterns and tendencies in novels such as those by Maria Matios, where notions like agency and guilt are approached and distributed differently than in Kharkiv's doubletake fiction. How do the western borderlands influence texts created there, if at all? Are such texts placeful? What kinds of historical narratives dominate, what temporal or spatial patterns emerge, and what is the most effective approach to plotting these imagined landscapes?

"Literature is like old snow," remarks Zhadan. "It cannot stop time, but it can slow time down."¹⁵ Given the fact that "in the Ukrai-

¹³ Zaharchenko, "A Ukrainian Thesaurus." For reverberations of the war on the Russian side, see Tanya Zaharchenko, "Beyond Pro and Anti: Monochrome Prefixes and Their Discontents," in *What Does Ukraine Think?* ed. Andrew Wilson (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015), 53–61.

¹⁴ In reference to Krasniashchikh's novel *Antropolozhnik* (2011), for instance, critics remark that it comes with a "purely Ukrainian drive and intellectual playfulness," without the pervasive melancholy characteristic of Russian literature ("Anons martovskogo nomera zhurnala *Novyi mir*," *Zhurnal'nyi zal*, March 2011, http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/anons/2011/an311.html). For an informed survey of what he terms *rusukrlit* (Russian Ukrainian literature), see Andrei Krasniashchikh, "Rusukrlit kak on est'," *Novyi mir* 9 (2015): 173–98.

¹⁵ Zhadan, "Vykhid," in *Potiah*, 40.

nian lands there was never a single territory which was not simultaneously claimed by at least two, and sometimes three or more, national movements,”¹⁶ the country’s turbulent history and restless cultural memory are likely to continue to seep into its texts. The way this part of the world looks back inevitably affects the way it moves forward. “The fantasies of the past,” writes Svetlana Boym, “determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future.”¹⁷ The events of the Maidan and its aftermath, which continue to unfold as these lines are being written, are a rich example of this impact: all kinds of symbols from the past, and references to that past, have emerged as an active force in the ongoing turmoil. To understand these processes, attentiveness to cultural memory is crucial. This book offers one possible way to dip into its richness.

¹⁶ Hrytsak, “Khto taki ukraïntsi,” 331.

¹⁷ Boym, “Nostalgia,” 8.

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Ukraine's eastern city of Kharkiv is a historical home of modern Ukrainian culture, but its vibrant bilingual literature has been persistently overlooked as a subject of study, often in Ukraine itself. In this refreshingly creative and incredibly timely book, which combines insights from both memory studies and border studies, Tanya Zaharchenko decisively moves "shimmering" Kharkiv from the margins to its rightful place at the center of our attention. A required read for anyone seeking to understand the remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity of today's Ukraine.

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Eastern Ukraine more often than not has been a place about which people speak on the basis of firmly held beliefs rather than knowledge and experience. As a consequence, voices from Eastern Ukraine become lost in a cacophony of politically driven polemics. Tanya Zaharchenko offers an invaluable corrective to what is assumed to be collective wisdom. By telling the story of a remarkably bright literary explosion in Kharkiv, she demonstrates the complexity of identity in a place where currents meet, and have done so for decades. This is an important book.

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